Table of Contents

1. Introduction
2. Allegiances
3. Flooded
4. Mist
5. Glory
6. Blaze
7. Confrontation
8. Jaded
9. Promises
10. Instinctive
11. Archaic
12. Repennance
13. Deciever
14. Guilt
15. Ascended
16. It's Almost Time- Important Notice
17. Unloved
18. Unforgiven
19. Revenge
20. Memory
21. Keeper
22. Misfits
23. Still
24. Darkness
25. Lust
26. Rustic
27. Keeper
28. Triumphant
29. Vigil
30. Moon
31. Kindred
32. Aging
33. Birdsong
34. Heat

35. Blizzard
36. Home
37. After
38. Author's Note

Introduction

This is our land. It calls to us from the peaks of the mountains that stand watch like valiant warriors all the way down to the dormant moors that rustle in the night breeze when the breeze blows over them. This is the place where rivers cascade down from mountains like tears of joy; where trees hold each other in wooden embraces, standing strong against the endless relent of time.

Above all, this is our home. We alone know the tunnels that run like veins under its surface. We are the ones who cry over the waterfall, we hunt among the golden stalks of wheat in the wheatfield, we take the lives of its prey, and we lay our fallen ones to nourish the land that nourishes us.

We waged war across these landscapes once, we made our families here, and we kept secrets that were told only to the wind upon our final breath.

However, this old generation is fading away. Endless lifetimes have passed since this land was tread beneath my paws, and even the kin of my heart has watched his bloodline run dry. The old DragonClan is only alive in spirit.

Some say it would take lifetimes for us to explore this land, potentially dozens in a place where lives are short but stories are long. Only I could piece together the shards of past lives that cling to the pelts of the cats here like burrs, but now that I am gone, no one has seen like that for a long time.

My story is a long one, but it is not the one I come to you to tell. I come to tell the story of another kit who rose from the depths of a catastrophe and bore my curse.

I give it to you as a gift, so that if only for a short time, you may run with us through these forests.

I know I would give anything to roam them again.

Allegiances

DRAGONCLAN

Leader: Shadowstar (long furred black she cat with icy blue eyes and a large scar up her back leg)

Deputy: Knottedspeech (older she cat with brown fur, slightly scruffy and very thin)

Medicine Cat: Sagesoul (gray she cat with sharp claws and a sharper tongue)

Tunnelkeeper: Cinderblaze (silver she cat with big eyes and bruised paws)

Warriors:
Carbonfrost (silver tom with bright blue eyes, intelligent)

Apprentice: Titanpaw

Snowpelt (white furred she cat with dark paws)

Drakesoul (dark tom with gold eyes and rings of brighter fur around paws)

Emberstreak (sleek ginger tabby with dull eyes and a long tail)

Amberstreak (amber she-cat with flashes of lighter and darker color)

Apprentice: Sunpaw

Duststorm (tan tom with thin legs)

Apprentice: Hazelpaw

Bluestorm (blue gray tom)

Cloudfrost (white furred tom with gray tints)

Apprentice: Rubypaw

Tinyblossom (small white she cat with tinted eyes)

Peacockwish (luxuriously dark furred she cat with an almost blue hue to her fur)

Apprentice: Frostpaw

Apprentices:
Titanpaw (bulky tan she-cat)

Rubypaw (small wiry red she cat)

Frostpaw (pale tom with dark eyes)

Hazelpaw (gray and darker gray tabby she-cat)

Sunpaw (gold she cat with tabby stripes)

Queens:

Foxfern (ginger she cat, mother of Sharpkit)

Scarletsky (lovely dark ginger she-cat, mother of Carbonfrost's kits)

Shadowstar (mother of Crowtalon's final litter)

Kits:

Rushkit (blue she cat with deep indigo eyes and one sliced ear)

Goldenkit (gold she cat with gold eyes)

Sparrowkit (tawny tom with spiky fur)

Ivykit (gray she cat with gold eyes)

Hailkit (blue gray tom with dull blue eyes)

Nettlekit (dark furred tom with unruly fur)

Novakit (black tom with russet markings and dark eyes)

Sharpkit (gray she cat with dark eyes and sharp claws)

Crowkit (black pelted she-cat)

Elders:

Owlflight (brown she cat with fur going gray from age, oldest cat in DragonClan)

Emeraldlight (gray she cat with green eyes)

WINDCLAN

Leader: Coalstar (white tom with black stripes down both sides and gray paws)

Deputy: Eagleeye (dark tortoiseshell tom with white paws, bright yellow eyes and unusually long claws)

Medicine Cat: Purplepelt (oddly hued tom)

Medicine Cat Apprentice: Skycloud (small white fluffy she-cat with blue-gray paws, tail and ears; has one blue and one purple eye and a ring of teeth marks around one front paw)

Warriors:Treefoot (very tall and muscular tom, dark brown pelt with cream flecks and underbelly and has icy blue eyes)

Apprentice: Smokepaw

Breezeclaw (dark gray tabby tom with blue eyes and a ripped ear tip)

Apprentice: Raggedpaw

Lunashade (small black she-cat speckled with white spots that resemble stars and has a silver crescent moon on her forehead)

Swiftfoot (light brown she-cat with green eyes)

Apprentice: Shellpaw

SpottedFur (small lithe she-cat with a dappled coat and blue eyes)

Spiderleg (small black tom with a red tail tip and red eyes, extremely agile and sneaky)

Apprentice: Flintpaw

Owlspirit (super fluffy brown tabby she-cat with white paws and green eyes; random, childish and can be clingy)

Apprentice: Raptorpaw

Leaprise (white tabby she-cat with brown stripes and green eyes)

Apprentice: Jaypaw

Mudpool (brown patched tabby she-cat with green eyes)

Apprentice: Robinpaw

Hopeflight (light gray tom with green eyes)

Apprentice: Leafpaw

Doefrost (brown she-cat with white spots and blue eyes)

Apprentice: Ravenpaw

Applefall (white tom with large black blotches and hazel eyes)

Apprentice: Mintpaw

Forestleaf (dark brown tom with tan spots and a white underbelly)

Amberowl (bright ginger she-cat with flecks of gray, black and brown)

Apprentice: Cloudpaw

Dogfang (dark tabby tom with green eyes and large dog-like claws)

Bluewater (blue-silver tom with green eyes)

GoldenStorm (golden tom with silver eyes, the fastest in the clan)

Apprentices:

Cloudpaw (white tom with brown flecks)

Flintpaw (gray tom with white ears and tail tip and has blue eyes)

Robinpaw (black she-cat with yellowish paws, a red scarred belly and dark brown eyes)

Leafpaw (dappled gray and white she-cat with bright green eyes and a black ring around left eye)

Raggedpaw (black tom with brown tail and amber eyes, likes to keep a clean pelt and loves voles)

Raptorpaw (gray tom with brown underbelly and head)

Ravenpaw (jet black she-cat with razor-sharp claws and unusually long fangs

Smokepaw (gray tom with striped short fur)

Queens:Ivysplash (black and white she-cat with blind blue eyes)

Moorwind (tall dark gray she-cat with white jaguar-like spots, a bushy tail and dark blue eyes)

Diamondshard (large white she-cat with gray paws and light blue eyes)

Elders:

Snowstorm (long-haired white tom with gray paws and green eyes, former medicine cat)

Pinetail (light brown tom with gray paws and green eyes, former medicine cat)

Squirrelleap (white she-cat with black and orange splotches and orange eyes)

Kits:

Sunkit (golden-furred tom with dazzling green eyes, tall and strong)

Webkit (white tom with sea green eyes)

Pigeonkit (gray she-cat with black and white streaks)

FeatherClan

Leader: Lapisstar (blue gray she cat with beautiful blue eyes)

LionClan

Leader: Snowstar (large white she cat with cold blue eyes)

Deputy: Thunderleap (Gray tom with gold eyes)

Medicine Cat: Leafstorm (Slender tabby she cat)

ForestClan

Leader: Leafstar (tan tom with large claws and dark eyes)

Deputy: Mossfire (coppery she-cat with a fiery temper)

Medicine Cat: Meadowbreeze (gray she-cat with dark splotches)

Warriors:
Shadowcatcher (dark gray she cat)

CATS OUTSIDE OF CLANS

Wave (gray tom with an odd lisp and impeccably bad timing)

Scorch (dark ginger tom with amber eyes and black paws)

Flooded

They always tell us the story the same way. It was a rainy day in late greenleaf, with the entire sky painted a menacing shade of gray. DragonClan was tensing for the storm, but no one was prepared for what happened next.

"I can't do this anymore!" Sagesoul's yowl cut the air like sharp claws, louder than the thunder of the storm overhead, and everyone in the camp turned to hear it. Her wide eyes looked at what had once been her clan. "The prophecy Knottedspeech recieved is fake! My prophecy is real. The kits I carry in my belly have twice the strength of any of you pathetic warriors." She hissed.

Shadowstar said nothing. She had always been too kind to Sagesoul, even and especially when she did something stupid or deliberately against the code. Now she watched silently as Sagesoul dashed out of camp for the last time.
"Sagesoul, wait!" Drakesoul, her mate, ran after her.
Knottedspeech, the deputy, narrowed her eyes. A small hiss found its way through her bared teeth. "Let them go."
Shadowstar said nothing. Her own belly was full of children. This promised to be a large litter, possibly that largest group of kits DragonClan had ever seen four- no, three queens now- all pregnant at once.

As if to show its indignance, thunder boomed loudly in the distance. The cats began backing into their dens. The whole clan had just gotten up and a solemn Shadowstar had made no patrols. Knottedspeech, in her place, had suggested they wait for the storm to blow over.

It showed no signs of stopping. The rain grew harsher, now fiercely pounding the ground. Every drop hurt like a needle and everyone hid in their dens, breath held.

There was another flash of lightning and an almost immediate roar of thunder when they saw the first signs of floodwater. Illuminated

by lightning, the floodwater rushed forwards, creeping into camp as if it was alive and angry.

"The nursery!" yowled Foxfern.
Shadowstar's eyes widened. "Get to higher ground! All queens! Now!"
"Shouldn't someone go after Sagesoul?" Peacockwish asked.

"No time!" Knottedspeech replied. "Everyone, get to high ground! There's some above the Highfall!"
The camp was build under a drop in the landscape where a waterfall cascaded into the river below. It wasn't more than fifteen feet, but to them it was large and intimidating and now it was furious. The water was up to the nursery now, and Foxfern tried to drag herself out but yowled in pain. "Kits!" she screeched.

Shadowstar's words caught in her throat. Her kits were coming as well, kicking furiously within her. Not too far away, Scarletsky, the final queen, dropped down.
Knottedspeech began yelling orders. "Emberstreak, Cloudfrost, Tinyblossom! Each of you to a queen! Everyone else get all the bedding up above the Highfall cliff. Go, go, go!"
Foxfern gave birth to a single she-cat as water continued pouring into the nursery. Cornered in the nursery, she gave her kit to Emberstreak and whispered for her to run. Emberstreak, terrified, began thrashing in the fully submerged nursery and made her way out, only breathing through her nose and inhaling water quickly. On the cliff, warriors shouted for her. Wave, a rogue who lived in the area, dove in and carried her on his back to the leader's den, shoving her and the kit up to safety.

Emberstreak dropped the kit, panting, only to find Shadowstar already there, surrounded by five kits and Tinyblossom.

"Where's Foxfern?" asked Tinyblossom.

Emberstreak broke down, gasping, unable to say a single word in terror and self-loathing.

"We have to go back for her!" yelled Bluestorm, who dove back in despite Knottedspeech's cries for him to stop.

They found him floating face up once the storm was over. Foxfern's body was found later.

Not moments later, three apprentices bought the last kits ashore. "These are Scarletsky's." Titanpaw said, licking one vigorously.

"Is Scarletsky dead too?" asked Tinyblossom.

"It takes a lot more than that to kill me." purred a voice from above. Scarletsky hopped down from the ledge, her mate by her side, and swam to the leader's den.

For a while, all ten kits and all the cats stood in silence, all terrified.

Slowly but surely, things got better. The water stopped rising. The sun came out.

My mother, Scarletsky, always claimed that we sparkled like StarClan cats when the sun first warmed us.

One by one, we were named to the cheers of all the warriors- I would be Rushkit, for the rushing tides; my brother would be Sparrowkit for the birds calling above; and Hailkit, my brother, would be named for the silver of summer hail which he resembled, being a big ball of white fluff. After that, all Shadowstar's kits were named, ending with Sharpkit, Foxfern's wayward child.

My mother looked down at us and purred, "You are all special and perfect."

That's what she tells us, anyways.

She says it's a miracle we all lived.

Sometimes I wonder if it would be more of a miracle if none of the warriors had died for us.

Mist

The water level is receding. The ground is still moist, and when anyone steps on it you can see water beneath their paws, but I've been told it was a lot worse. There was a time less than a moon ago when the water was all the way up to the base of the leader's den, angrily lapping at the edge of the last refuge available.

Sometimes I sit by the edge and wonder if the water will come back and drown us like it drowned so many warriors before us.

However, there are so many other things to do here besides wallowing in doubt and self pity. There are games to play, friends to meet, milk to drink... and revenge.

My cut ear stings slightly. It was only a few days ago that the incident happened. I still remember how easily his claw ripped through the tender skin of my ear. It may have been an accident, but that won't stop me from taking the perfect opportunity to pounce.

Like a clueless rabbit, he stops for a moment by Shadowstar, who is sleeping and covered in mud from a whole day repairing camp. I sneak around to the back of her, taking advantage of his momentary distraction to pounce. With a soaring leap, I fly over Shadowstar and land on top of Nettlekit, who squeaks as I bowl him over.

My tiny claws unsheathe, pinning him. "Rushkit!" he yells indignantly.

"What?" I ask. "Are you scared that I'll wreck up your ear?"
"This is the third time you've attacked me today." He continues struggling, and eventually manages to get off me with a powerful twist, throwing me sideways. I land a tail length from Shadowstar's back leg and get up.

"I want to make sure I get my revenge!" I show off my sharp teeth and raise my hackles like I'm preparing to attack again. He shrinks

back, looking around for other kits.

Sure enough, Sharpkit butts in. "What are you two doing next to Shadowstar? She's trying to sleep and you're gonna wake her up!"

"Rushkit attacked me!" complains Nettlekit.

"He's just getting justice for what he did to my ear. Scarletsky says it's never going to heal." I state promptly. He looks guilty, flattening his ears aggressively but then looking away.

"Look, I don't care about your stupid fight. Get away from my mom and let her sleep." Sharpkit hisses.

"It's not even your mom." I mumble.

"What?!"
"It's not even *your* mom. It's Nettlekit's mom, and you're always bugging her so she never has any time for her real kits."

Sharpkit hisses loudly. "G-go away! Can't you just bug some other tom?"
"Maybe I will!" I say, stomping away with a swish of my tail. I notice Goldenkit, another one of Shadowstar's kits, nod appreciatively. It makes me feel better about what I have to do to Sharpkit for the other kits.

I look around for another tom I don't know well, and settle on the dark colored one watching the rain. He looks a lot like Shadekit, who I never talk to. I wonder if he's another one of Shadowstar's kits.

"Hello." I say, sitting down beside him. "You bored too?"
"Nah." He says. "I'm just looking at all this. It's really a beautiful world we live in."

I wrinkle my nose. "But it's so wet. The warriors are always sad and everyone up here is always fighting."
"It won't be that way for long. Things will be better when I take over."
My eyes widen. "Are you going to steal leader from Shadowstar?"
"No. I'm going to earn leader. The clan will be calling my name. I

can't wait." I hear a purr in his throat. "Say... you're special, aren't you? I can see it in your eyes. They're dark blue, like water at night, but they're flecked with gold. Gold is a powerful color, you know... and eyes say a lot about everyone around you. They're the windows to the soul."
I nod, choking on air. "You think I'm special?"
"Yeah. I do."
"I... th-thank you."
He purrs. "I've never heard anyone take a compliment like that. Lighten up a bit. You know what? I actually have an idea. I think you'll like it."
"What is it?"
He turns away, pricking his ears. "Wait a second. Someone's out there."

"Oh." I say, looking over the edge of the leader's den into the rest of camp. Sure enough, a ginger tom is walking through the camp, in a clan where all the warriors are out on patrol.

"We've left ourselves vulnerable." The kit by my side hisses under his breath.

I gulp. "Is he a threat?"
"Nope. Just a curious rogue. Heard about this place from a friend." says the ginger cat below. He's about apprentice age, maybe a little younger. "I have to say, it's quieter than I expected. Who are you two?"
"Novakit." Novakit gets up from my side and walks all the way to the edge, getting a better look. "This is Rushkit. She's my best friend."
The rogue looks back up at us. "Alright then. I'll be back later when someone a little bigger is up to welcome me, but I'll remember the names. Rushkit. Novakit. You two kits stay out of trouble, alright?"
We both stand and watch him leave, neither of us uttering a word.
"Are rogues usually that nice?" I say when he's gone.

Novakit shakes his head. "We got lucky. This clan is in shambles at the moment. That's why I want to fix it. I just can't do it alone. I'll need an accomplice by my side. The moon to my sun. The stars in my sky. The deputy once I'm leader."
I nod. "I guess so... but only under one condition."

"Yes?"
"You gotta be my deputy if I make it to leader first."

He smiles knowingly, and we return to watching the mist rise over the DragonClan camp.

Glory

I lie gently by Novakit's side, feeling his breath rise and fall as I curl around him, revelling in his warmth. It's a cold morning, and the sun shines bleakly above us but here, I am whole and perfect. The other kits tussle around us, although I watch none of them, I prick my ears specifically to hear my own brother, Sparrowkit, tussling with the others. My play has always been a bit too rough, but the other kits laugh when he tackles them.

Resentfully, I press into Novakit. I feel bored and my tail's twitching. "I have an idea." Novakit tells me, getting up.

"You do?" I say, stretching out quickly. My tail twitches in excitement. "Thank goodness! I was getting so tired of just sitting there all day."
He nudges me. "Sure. I know you like sitting next to me."
"Of course I do, but I also love running around and stuff. The other kits just don't want to play with me."

"I'm sure Hailkit does."

"Hailkit's never awake. Mami says there's something wrong with him."

Novakit's eyes look shocked. "My siblings never go to sleep. They're so annoying. Anyhow, we should probably start playing that game now, shouldn't we?" he teases.

"Yeah! What are we doing?"

"I was thinking we could make a kit clan." he says with a malicious smile.

"A kit clan?"
"Just like a regular clan, but just for us to do when we get bored. I'll be leader, the fierce Novastar, and you can be my deputy, the

powerful Rushcall. No cat dares cross their combined wit and skill, and together they form..."

"AspenClan?" I suggest.

"NovaClan." He counters.

"FoxClan!"

"MoonClan."

"DarkClan!"
"I like it." He says. "I name you Rushcall, deputy of DarkClan!"

We're interrupted by a dark figure overhead. "What are you kits doing?" asks Shadowstar. "You're making quite the ruckus."

"We're making a-" I yell, but Novakit stops me.

"We're just messing around." His eyes are stern. I close my mouth. Surely, what we're doing can't be wrong, can it? It's just a game, after all.

"Alright. You two have fun. I'm going to get the patrols ready and maybe even go out for a while myself. Don't let me catch you attacking the other kits again, Rushkit."

"Me?" I feign innocence, and Novakit purrs deeply at my look of mock bewilderment at the accusation.
Shadowstar snort out of her nose. With one last tail flick and a leer from dark and fearsome eyes, she turns to go and joins the mob of warriors, moving among them towards the HIghfall. That leaves Novakit and I with the other kits nestled in the leader's den, along with Scarletsky, who at this point is in charge of all of the kits collectively.

Novakit gets up slowly, and I stumble up by his side. I'm just about to open my mouth when a loud screech fills the air and I am tackled sideways by a blur of soot and tiny claws. Nettlekit lands on my back and I fall with an "Oof."

"So you two are making a kit clan, huh?" He says, eyes shining. His

tail swings back and forth and his teeth are bared.
I swing a bit to the left to unbalance him and then swing right, knocking him off my back. "So what if we are?"
"Thank StarClan Shadowstar didn't catch you. She hates kit clans. She has some weird prejudice against them. It's like she doesn't know it's just a game."

"I stopped her from saying anything." Novakit says. "Well, Nettlekit, would you like to join?"

"He can't join our kit clan!" I protest. "He's stupid!"
"Not as stupid as you, mousebrain!" He retorts.

"I name you Nettleheart of DarkClan. You two, if you fight so help me to StarClan, I'll... get back to you on that."

I nod in awe of this very real threat. "When he gets back to us, you're really going to be in for it."

Nettlekit looks unimpressed. "Well I just won't get into trouble, then. So, what do we do in DarkClan?"

"Well, first, we find a camp. Then we set up our nests and guard it with our lives! We'll do patrols and stuff. It'll be fun. Just the three of us!" He jumps down the rocks that lead to the rest of camp with a swish of his long tail. Nettlekit and I share a glance of mutual distrust as we follow him all the way to a bush.

I open my mouth to protest but Novakit jumps inside. Nettlekit follows, and I find a good opening and tumble through the first layer of leaves into a very small overhang that the branches seem to have arched over, giving us room to move around. Novakit begins collecting leaves and without hesitation, I do the same.

The leaves are tiny, and they stick to my tongue when I try to carry them in my mouth, but after a while I have a pile large enough to sit down on. Nettlekit watches from above. "I've been scouting the furthest reaches of the territory, and I can now confirm it's pretty boring all the way up." He jumps back down, hitting a branch and scattering stray leaves everywhere. A few fall into my pile and I scramble to get the rest.

"Well, you've also discovered something we can use for the benefit of the clan. All we have to do to get more leaves is jump on the branches!"
"I call jumping!" I say.

"No, I call it! I'm the one who discovered it." Nettlekit hisses.

"Well, I'd be a better adventurer than you anyways. I'll take your job." I say, climbing up onto a branch with some difficulty.

"Yeah, right! You can hardly get onto that branch!" He leaps past me onto the next one.

"Yeah I can!" I begin jumping frantically across the branches, half running and half leaping across the small gaps. Nettlekit runs after, and soon we're at the edge. He barrels into me and we both fall out of the bush onto the ground.

We find ourselves looking up at Shadowstar. My heart stops beating for a second in terror. Does she know we've made a kit clan? Is she going to stop us?
I scent something odd off of her, something I've never quite smelled before. It's the scent cats give off when they're talking about the flood. It's fear-scent, and it rises from her like smoke.

"Shadowstar, are you alright?" asks a warrior, striding towards us. The scent of herbs clings to her- it's not a warrior after all, it's Tinyblossom, who recently became the new medicine cat.

"Mami?" asks one of her kits anxiously, "Are you okay?"

The whole clan seems to turn to us. I feel Nettlekit tense and Novakit peeks his way through the bushes.

"I have seen... t-t-terrible things." Shadowstar mutters. Her eyes are skittish, never stopping in one place for more than a second. "I was down in the tunnels, pursuing prey, and I was given... I was given a prophecy. I fear what is to come for this clan..."

"It's okay. You're going to be alright." Tinyblossom says, supporting Shadowstar. The rest of the clan is dumbstruck upon seeing their leader so weak. "I'm taking her to the medicine den. Knottedspeech

will have patrols. Everyone, please leave us alone."

I watch them go with curiosity and fear in my eyes.

The black kit walks up to us. "Do you think she's okay?"

Novakit looks down.

"No." I confess. "I don't think she's going to be okay at all."

Blaze

Shadowstar is quieter in the following days. She's always in the medicine den, talking quietly with Tinyblossom like she thinks we can't hear her. The clan has taken to clustering around it, distressed by how closed off two of their authority figures are.

No one knows everything that goes on in there, and Shadowstar always snaps at whoever she catches outside (usually apprentices), but everyone knows bits and pieces of the prophecy.

"Golden eyes," mentions Hazelpaw to us one day. "They say the prophesied cat has golden eyes."

"That's why everyone thinks it's Goldenkit. You can bet they'll be keeping a close eye on her from now on." adds Rubypaw.

"Well, I think it's all stupid. Why are we even afraid of this cat? Some sort of curse we don't know exists? This is sounding more and more like a story elders would tell to spook kits and less and less like rational discussion amongst clanmates." Titanpaw snaps. She's the biggest and bossiest of all of the apprentices, and both of them shrink when they hear her.

"There has to be something to it. You can't fool the warriors that easily." Rubypaw objects.

"I think it sounds cool." Hazelpaw adds. "Haven't you ever wanted to be caught in the middle of a prophecy? Think about it! Drama! Action! Romance! All the cats who lived around prophecy times are immortalized in DragonClan history."
Titanpaw snorts. "You're both ridiculous. Stop messing with the kits, it's going to go to their heads."

Novakit, Sharpkit, Sparrowkit and I watch this eagerly, and all of us object loudly. "We're not that malleable!" Novakit says indignantly.
"You're just no fun, Titanpaw."
"Yeah!" Sharpkit says.

"Apprentices aren't supposed to be 'fun', we're supposed to be 'learning'. By the way, we're going to get in a ton of trouble for telling rumors to kits when we're supposed to be doing some repairs."

"Repairs are finished. The kits are moving into the new nursery tonight. We have nothing to do, that's not our fault." Hazelpaw says casually.

"Yes you do." Emberstreak approaches, tail lashing. "You three are going to have to explain this." She bumps a cat at her side, who looks guilty and mischievous. I recognize him immediately.

"Hi, Scorch!" I call, and he purrs loudly. Emberstreak's muzzle scrunches up in confusion.

"You know this cat?" she asks.

"You remember me?" Scorch asks, seeming mildly amused by the whole ordeal.
"Yeah, from that one time almost a moon ago! I was really little then." I purr.

"You're still so little now. You clan cats grow so slowly." He teases, cuffing me behind the ear with a paw.

"Don't touch our kits!" Emberstreak says.

"I don't think he's hostile." Titanpaw says, looking less agitated and even slightly entertained.

"I'm not." He turns around. "I came here to join this clan, if you'll have me."
Emberstreak looks profoundly surprised at this. All the apprentices and kits turn to her with wide eyes. "Come this way." They slink away, Scorch with his head a little higher.

"You kits should go work on moving to the new den. We should go." Titanpaw says curtly.

"Did you see that new cat?" Hazelpaw asks. "I think I saw him in the woods once."

"I don't care where they found him." Rubypaw pauses, then adds, "He's kinda cute."
"Alright girls, let's not get distracted here." Titanpaw says, flicking her tail across both of their flanks. "We have work to do."

We watch them go. Sharpkit pads after them. "The leader's den is the other way, stupid!" I yell. "Where do you think you're going?" She turns around and leers at me before continuing onwards. I cackle. Novakit looks boredly after the she-cats. "Apprentices are so shallow. I'm glad you're not like that."

"Of course not! I'd never want to be boring." I say, purring. I plop my head down on his back.

"Sure. Being mean must be so much better." Sparrowkit snaps before walking contemptuously after Sharpkit.

I feel my hackles raise but say nothing. I remove my head from Novakit's back and we walk back to the leader's den where Nettlekit and my mother already wait with leaves, ready for the big move. Beside her, Goldenkit and Crowkit are chatting idly.

I jump up the rocks and begin heading to my den. Novakit nods at the two she-cats as he passes by and they both look awestruck by even this smallest of gestures.

I grab as much moss as I can in my teeth and look down. The pile has barely diminished.

This is when I realize it's going to be a long day.

We spend most of the afternoon gathering our bedding from the old den and dragging it into the new den. I'm tired and hot, so I fall onto my new den with a thud.

"That's where I was going to sleep!" Sharpkit complains, standing over me. "You just came and took my spot!"
"Well maybe you should've marked it first!" I hiss back, hackles raised.

"Maybe the two of your should stop fighting." Sparrowkit warns, coming out of nowhere. I look around but Novakit isn't here. That

means I'm fighting on my own.

"Why? Is there a problem?" I snap.
"She's my friend." Sparrowkit says timidly. "I just don't like watching you fight."
We both stop, unable what to say next without hurting Sparrowkit's feelings. With a loathing glare, I flick my tail.
"You both sound so beautiful, you know. Melodies like that should work in harmony." Sparrowkit says.

"Melody?" I ask. "Sound?"

"She doesn't know?" Sharpkit whispers. She looks happy about this. I can tell she shares some secret with my brother. Is it a secret code of a sort?

"Wh-what do I not know!" I stutter angrily, suddenly on my guard. All my muscles are tensed and my ears are flat.

Sharpkit shoots a longing glance at Sparrowkit but he speaks anyways. "I can hear souls. They sound kind of like birdsong. I know it's weird, but I promise I'm telling the truth."

I tilt my head. "Uh... okay. If this is some sort of game..."
"It's not!" he snaps. "I promise! I can't prove it to you now, but I will someday. Just come up with a way I can test it."

I stay silent. "What if I was to hide somewhere in the camp and you find me based on the song thingy?"

Sparrowkit looks at Sharpkit and back. "Okay. I'm gonna count to thirty. Starting... now!"
I dash off in the opposite direction. With a savage grin, I jump in the nearby freshkill pile to hide my scent and then jump past the wall of the camp. He'd never expect to see me out here!
"Thirty!" I hear. I watch Sparrowkit amble out of the den through the bushes... then I see him close his eyes. Step by step, he walks right to me and then opens his eyes, peering through the bush.

I stand in shock for a few seconds. Sharpkit is grinning savagely from a while away.

"I'm sorry. It's weird." Sparrowkit murmurs.

"Do you think you're the golden eyed prophecy cat?" I ask suddenly. The prospect is still vivid in my mind.

"My eyes aren't gold. Maybe there are a ton of special cats in DragonClan no one even knows about."
I nod, excited by this, when suddenly I hear, "All cats come to the Highfall for a Clan Meeting!"
I jump through the bush and follow the mob to the Highfall, which is a rock on the right edge of the waterfall. There are stones on the way up so the leader can get up or down, but Shadowstar still looks untouchable as she looms over the crowd. By her side, Knottedspeech, her brown fur blowing in a breeze over the waterfall, sits licking her paw. She's even older than Shadowstar but not quite as scary, and her eyes make her look resigned.

I notice Scorch in the audience at Emberstreak's side. His amber fur sparkles in the dusky twilight. His tail flicks as Shadowstar yowls, "We have a rogue in our midst tonight, but he wishes to be a rogue no longer."
Emberstreak looks sort of sad. "She's thinking about Wave." says Hazelpaw at my side. "He was another rogue who she was in love with. He hasn't come around since the flood."

"Probably dead." adds Rubypaw.

"Stop it!" Hazelpaw hisses back, teasingly. "That's so mean!"
"Both of you, be quiet. This is extremely rude to both Emberstreak and Shadowstar." Sandstorm hisses, glaring down at them.

"Sorry." They both shrink and I continue looking up.

"Do you promise to care for this clan and train diligently until you become an apprentice?"
"I do." Scorch lifts his head and looks right into Shadowstar's eyes.

"I name you Scorchpaw. I will take on your training myself." Shadowstar replies.

The clan roars, "Scorchpaw! Scorchpaw!" They're used to rogues

joining. The last leader, Crabstar, was not only Shadowstar's father but a rogue himself. According to the older warriors, she still lives under his legacy.

"We should get back to the nursery." I hear a voice and turn around, expecting to see Novakit but instead seeing my brother, Sparrowkit.

I walk with him, looking for Novakit but not seeing him. Disappointment crosses my face but Sparrowkit doesn't notice. He's unnaturally tense.

When we get back to our new den, Scarletsky is there but Hailkit is nowhere to be seen. I feel bad about not talking to him lately. He's always been snarky or quiet with no in between, so he's not much fun to play with, but he's still my brother.

"Where's Hailkit?" I ask.

Scarletsky looks away at the question. It's a long time before she replies. "He's sick. Tinyblossom is probably helping him as we speak." She looks back at me and Sparrowkit and she wails loudly, turning away and disappearing into the back of our new den.

I waited outside the medicine den in the morning with Sparrowkit. They wouldn't let us in. "Your brother might be contagious. I'm immune to many diseases that you kits are susceptible to."

"We won't get too close! We just wanted to say goodbye to him." I insist.

"He's not singing anymore." My brother says solemnly. My heart skips a beat. What does that mean for Hailkit? Why is Sparrowkit's weird soul-hearing stuff so confusing?
Tinyblossom looks confused but she escorts us in, where I look upon my brother's limp form. Something crawls inside of me, a bad feeling that I can't really place. It feels like hate and loathing, with a touch of sadness to it. I just don't know who it's directed at.

Sparrowkit and I sit there for a while in silence, unsure of what to say, and then I whisper, "Get better soon." We leave tail in tail, both deeply reassured by the other's presence.

We never saw Hailkit again.

Confrontation

"This draws the first official warriors ceremony of DarkClan to a close." Novakit says, jumping down from a branch.

"Sparrowsong! Sparrowsong! Sparrowsong!" Nettlekit and I call. Sparrowkit walks amongst us, obviously embarrassed by the attention.

"So what now?" I ask.

"Border patrol!" Nettlekit replies.

Sparrowkit nods, and Novakit nods for us to go. "I'll guard camp." he says.

We patrol the exterior of the bush together, proudly, trying to imagine it as a massive territory instead of one bush on the edge of camp. It's really easy to imagine it as a lot bigger if I lower myself close to the ground, but the warriors are all staring at us, including my mother, who I can see watching her kits play eagerly.

My ears prick as I hear pawsteps and see Sharpkit wander towards us with a smirk on her face. I dive into the bush, gesturing for my clanmates to follow. They do so, confused but both excited.
"What's going on?" whispers Sparrowkit.

"Intruder!" I hiss lowly. I indicate Sharpkit.

Sparrowkit is about to say something but Nettlekit says to me, "We should ambush her!"
"Great idea! One two three GO!" I jump out of the bush and Sharpkit yowls as I crash on top of her. She looks up and her claws unsheathe, but she can't get me off of her. I purr, enjoying how much larger I am, which comes mainly from my larger share of milk and ability to grab the biggest prey first.

Sparrowkit looks nervous. "Maybe we should ease up. She's not

really an intruder."

"Alright." I say, begrudgingly. I lift myself off Sharpkit, but she immediately flings herself on top of me, tail lashing. Her face is bared into an ugly snarl.

"No one likes your stupid weird kit clan! You're always trying to keep me out of it." Sharpkit hisses, her claws unsheathed. "You attacking me is as far as this goes!"

"You can join us, if you want. We never said any of that." I tell her, through gritted teeth. My fur is hot. Of course I don't want her in DarkClan but nothing I say will keep her out now and I don't want her to go tell Shadowstar.

"W-what? You're just saying that so I don't tell Shadowstar!"

Well, obviously, but I'm not going to tell her that. "No! You can be Sharptooth! You could be our medicine cat if you want!"

"Look, I'm sorry that she attacked you-" Sparrowkit says, but Sharpkit puts a paw to his side, cutting him off with narrowed eyes.

"I don't want to hear it from you!" She spits at my brother, her eyes narrowed. Everything about her indicates fear but she keeps going, shaking at the confrontation. "You betrayed me for them! We were supposed to be friends, with big heroic destinies but you're one the wrong side! Shadowstar's gonna- she's gonna-"

"I'm 'gonna' what?" Shadowstar snaps, standing overhead. My ears flatten and my eyes widen, knowing it's too late now. Whatever apologies I could've issued, now Shadowstar's going to end the clan.

"They have a KIT clan!" Sparrowkit says proudly, as if she's just discovered a conspiracy from other clans to kill us all.

Shadowstar looks as if we murdered her father. "You kits made what?"

"It's just a game!" Novakit says, dashing out of the bushes. "We didn't mean any harm!"

"Kit clans are not just a game. They're a dangerous way to foster rebellion in impressionable minds and set up a hierarchy between

kits who should all be learning and training together as equals. You have no idea what you're doing and it needs to be disbanded, *right now*."

"Mom, you can't disband it!" pleads Nettlekit. "It's fun!"

I hiss back at the leader, infuriated. My heart races faster. *No, no, no! You can't disobey the leader.* says part of me. *You're about to get in huge trouble and you'll never get to be an apprentice and you'll be stuck here in the nursery forever!*

Another part of me whispers, *Of course we'll get in trouble, but you'll get to prove her wrong.*

Not this early.

Right now. We know why she's afraid.

I realize, still staring up at Shadowstar, that the voices in my head are carrying on a conversation without my involvement. I don't even have to put the words there for them to say, they just talk as if... as if they're real.

I look down at my paws and a voice comes out of my mouth, sliding out like water over the waterfall. Another force takes over me as easily as if it had never happened. My whole body tingles with energy. "You're still bitter over WillowClan."

Shadowstar's eyes slit until the pupils are barely visible. "How do you know about WillowClan?"

I look back up at her and she gags as I see myself reflected in her eyes. My eyes are glowing gold, as if illuminated from within.

Titanpaw watches from a distance, her pupils slit and her eyes wide. "Golden eyes! Golden eyes!"

Multiple warriors, at least those still in camp, rush over. My mother watches from a distance, scared, but she's no longer my parent. This ancient cat walking on my legs, using my mouth, no longer has any family here. However, she does have infinite years of knowledge and the power of a warrior in the soul of a kit.

"I know a lot of things about you, Shadowstar. I know how you miss your mate. I know how you ran away when you were an apprentice and only came back when your friend starved to death. I know how when Crowtalon died, you-"

There's a loud THWACK and I realize my body is flying through the air, like a bird jumping from a tree only to find it can not fly, and Shadowstar has hit me with unsheathed claws. I land, bleeding, on my side, and a pained mewl escapes my throat as the spirit who possessed me leaves as quickly as it came.

Shadowstar rounds on me, but this time Scarletsky is holding her back. "Not my child! She didn't mean it! She didn't mean it!"

Shadowstar throws her off and Sparrowkit, who has been standing in shock the whole time, runs to her. Novakit attempts to lunge at Shadowstar but is thrown aside. Shadowstar finally advances on me as I stagger to get up, unable to defend myself, looking into her furious eyes as she screeches, "I don't know what you are, but I know what I've seen in my dreams and you will never," She unsheathes her claws again, "Ever," She lifts her paw.

"Stop!" Knottedspeech jumps in the way of Shadowstar's next attack. "She's just a kit!" Her patrol, having just returned, stands behind her. They're all shocked, and a few have dropped their prey from their mouths.

Knottedspeech and Shadowstar face off for what seems like a silent eternity before Tinyblossom walks in. "Shadowstar."

"It's her. She's here."

"Shadowstar!"

"We have to kill her. We have to kill her right now or she's going to kill all of us."

"She's just a kit!" argues Knottedspeech. "You're letting your nightmares control you!"

"Maybe you're letting your eyes deceive you." Shadowstar snarls. I've never seen her so angry. Her head whips around as she looks at every single cat in the clan in turn, at least everyone here. "She's going to destroy us all, and you're all going to regret not listening!"

Shadowstar rushes into her den, as if she's the kit and not the leader. Tinyblossom follows.

The clan sits in shocked silence, and not a purr is heard for the rest of the night. That night, I notice Nettlekit has moved away from me. I enjoy Novakit's fur against mine, but even he can not keep me safe from the nightmares that await me.

It's my fault.

Why did I do it?
What controlled me?
I realize that for the first time in my life, I don't know what I'll wake up to.

***

There's a dark figure in camp the next morning, lying still as a log or a stone would, but my fur prickles and something tells me this is neither the second I stumble upon it. As I walk towards it, I find multiple cats are clustered around it, all talking in anxious tones.

"She had six lives left!"
"Was she murdered?"

A wail goes up from one of the kits sitting there, who I recognize as Sharpkit. While she was adopted, she was also arguably closest to...

Shadowstar.

A scream chokes itself in my throat as I look at Shadowstar's dead form. She's sopping wet, and her eyes are blank and glossy. There's no fear on her face, only an empty, completely blank expression. Water falls from her open mouth as well as her pelt.

"No." Tinyblossom says. "She wasn't murdered. She drowned herself."

The clan looks shocked. My heart beats faster. Was it me? Was it my fault? After the arguement, small as it was, was Shadowstar really angry enough to take her own life? Knottedspeech says worriedly, "Why would she do something like this? Is there

something we haven't been told?" The clan echoes her concerns.

"It was Rushkit!" whines Sharpkit. "She was what sent her over! We should exile her!"

Luckily, no one agrees with her. The rest of the clan does not share the sentiment, thankfully enough for me. Everyone discusses reasons, of which 'age' and 'nerves' are two but the biggest one seems to be 'lack of leadership qualities'. Shadowstar was not as respected by the clan as she would like to have thought.

"The blame falls on my shoulders." Tinyblossom says, her ears flat and her lithe form shaking with sadness and suppressed emotion. "I tried to help her but there was simply nothing I could do. She was getting worse by the day."

"What? What was wrong with her?" yowls Sandstorm.

"We deserve an explanation!" Amberstreak protests.

"Does this have to do with the constant trips to the medicine cat den?" asks Carbonfrost, still eying the body.

Tinyblossom nods. "While down in the tunnels, Shadowstar saw some things involving a prophecy still to come for this clan. I believe it was not the message but what it entailed and the way it was delivered that drove Shadowstar to insanity. I've been to the place where she claims she saw it myself, but there's no tunnel there. It would appear this was an omen for her alone."

"So what was the omen?" presses Titanpaw.

"Why would our mother kill herself?" wails Goldenkit, nudging her mother's body.

"Are we being punished for something?" Titanpaw asks.

"Quiet! I do not wish to reveal how she found out about the omen, but the message was as follows: 'When water meets sky and dark seeks sun, the twin cursed souls return as one.'"

There was a loud roar across the clan at this, everyone yelling this and that, but the message was clear enough. "Quiet down! Quiet down!" Knottedspeech hisses, but no one is listening. The

panic rises in my throat as my ears ring, pure terror coursing through my body. I want to run but there's nowhere I can go. Worse yet, I know who all the cats are talking about.

"It's her!"
"She had the golden eyes!"

"We need to get rid of her!"
Dozens of pairs of eyes turn to me.

I am the curse the prophecy spoke of, and I've just indirectly killed the leader.

((Like the cover? It's a temporary affair while I work on the other one (along with the cover for Retold) but for now it should be okay. Discuss it in the comments! Speaking of things to discuss in comments, what was THAT? I wanna hear some theories! DC cats, don't spoil it!))

Jaded

Sometimes, when I'm alone, I try to close my eyes and talk to them, just to see if they'll listen. I know the mysterious angry voices in my head are still there, waiting at the back of my mind for the next time they see fit to strike.

I don't want to admit it, but I'm scared of them.

However, Novakit is always close to my side, clinging there as if he's holding onto something. He's the only one, although Sparrowkit looks my way sometimes and is still civil in DarkClan meetings. Nettlekit, too, is always a little more distant now. I hear others murmur about me sometimes, but on the bright side Sharpkit never bothers me anymore.

On the bright side, no one really bothers me anymore.

Knottedstar, the new leader, has already made Titanpaw a warrior. Titanfoot is on her way to becoming the sassiest, bossiest cat in the clan. I purr just thinking about her. Even if we aren't friends by any means, she's popular. Everyone in the clan just knows and respects her in the way they respect Knottedstar.

However, Knottedstar was late to go to the Moonstone and as such has garnered a lot of rumors stemming from one fact- three days after Shadowstar died, she still hasn't picked a deputy.

"Crowsong! Crowsong! Crowsong!" I'm snapped back into the moment by the cheer of my friends. Our new medicine cat, Crowsong, better known as Crowkit, looks around, her eyes glittering with excitement.

Novastar looks around at all of his warriors. "Well, we should get back to work. Does anyone have those pine needles?"

We all look around but in our excitement to see Crowsong made an

official member not a single one of us has done our morning duties for the clan. We all scramble off to see who can find the precious pine needles for 'medicine' the fastest.

We're not allowed to pillage the real medicine den so we make our own herbs up. It might not be a perfect solution, but it's always worked well enough. After all, if we needed real herbs, we'd also need a real medicine cat.

I hear a rustling in the bushes and my ears twitch a few times, my neck craning to hear the sound. I hear it again, this time louder, and my fur prickles. No DragonClan cat would feel the need to hide for so long.

"Who's there?" I hiss.

Something stirs again with a frightened 'eep'! Curious eyes watch me through the bushes. I instinctively unsheathe my claws, bristling as a small cat falls through the bushes. "Are you DragonClan?"

Everyone in DarkClan turns around. I notice a few other cats come to the scene, pelts rushing past me, claws unsheathed.

There lies a small black cat with dazzling green eyes and thick fur. She's clearly well fed, but also clearly very young. "Don't hurt me!" I blink, not sure what to do. My tail waves a bit, yet I'm not too scared. DragonClan is known for the rogue population, if Scorchpaw is any indication. He himself is around here somewhere, probably on a patrol.

"What do you want?" Nettlekit mimics the harsh voice that a warrior would have on patrol.

"I-I want to join your clan!" she says suddenly.

"You can't just-" Novakit starts, but there's a loud yell from behind and his fur stands on end. We all turn around to see Titanfoot there, smirking.

"Welcome aboard!" she purrs.Her eyes are focused on the newcomer and she looks terribly happy to see this kit we don't even know.

"Wow! You're so big! You must be a really fierce warrior!" Jade says, looking up at Titanfoot with nothing short of adoration in her eyes.

I think to myself that the flattery is sure to get her nowhere, but she seems to have said all the right things because Titanfoot says, "Oh, this one's good." She nudges the kit. "You! You and I, we're going to be close from now on. With a sweet tongue like that you'll be able to charm all the warriors. The two of us will rule this clan. Say, what's your name?"
"Jade." says the rogue. I catch a breath of rogue scent off her and wonder how anyone can tolerate being near her. She looks back at me with a small smirk and I know that this cat is trouble. However, it seems... almost malicious. It's as if this cat already knows me and is trying, quite purposefully, to antagonize me.

I hiss under my breath, but Sparrowkit catches me.

"Are you going to kill her too?" he whispers in my ear, the one furthest from the others.
My eyes widen. "What?"

"I can hear your song. You're broken all the way to the core. Don't try anything... because next time, I'll stop you." he says deeply.
"I just argued with Shadowstar!" I hiss. "She was already crazy. It was just a stupid spat over a kit clan! Our kit clan!"
He looks away, as if he can't even bare to look at me for a second longer.

"Titanfoot! Who's that?" he asks.

"This is Jade!" Titanfoot says.

He runs to her, and instantly a common kinsmanship forms in their eyes. It's as if they already know each other. I notice Sparrowkit's ears twitching, and something clicks in the back of my mind. My fur prickles as I realize what exactly might be going on here.

"What's up with that one?" asks Jade as she looks my way just loud enough for me to hear. "She looks like she smells something funny."

"Yeah." Novakit says. "Probably got a whiff of you."

Jade prickles but tries not to show it.

"Wow, that's super rude. No way to treat a visitor." snaps Hazelpaw, still as much one of Titanfoot's lackeys as she was when they were both apprentices.
"Future clanmate!" insists Titanfoot.
"Anyhow, she kind of... got into a spat with the leader before she died. She's probably traumatized. Plus, you sort of look like her." Sparrowkit says.

"Your leader?" Jade asks. She looks mock surprised, as if she's been fishing for this for a while and finally got to ask the question.

"Shadowstar. She was our former leader. Black fur-" Hazelpaw begins.
"Green eyes. To be honest, it's more of a blessing than anything." Rubypaw finishes for her.

"She was completely crazy in the head." Hazelpaw adds.

"Terrible leader." Rubypaw tuts, regretfully.
"You don't have empathy for your fallen leader?" Jade looks shocked, almost angry. Her fur prickles as if she's taking personal offense.

Wait... what if she is?

"We would if she didn't practically send cats to their death several times in a twelve moon leadership." sneered Rubypaw.

"She was a terrible leader." added Novakit, completely bereft of emotion for his own mother.

"I never heard about her being awful. None of the warriors ever seemed discontent." I object, trying to hide the anxiety cracking through my voice.

"You kits weren't old enough to know." replies Titanfoot. "Anyhow, they're exaggerating. It makes for a better story if our history has someone to demonize."

"We aren't telling anything but the truth." Rubypaw insists.

Jade takes this all in with wide eyes, and against my will I feel my fur prickle. This is the darker side of DragonClan, things this kit shouldn't know, and here she is, learning all of our darkest secrets. I alone seem to notice the fakeness in her smile, but there's a rustle in the bushes and the warriors are all silent.

Knottedstar comes into camp slowly, walking with power in her stride. Her eyes look from the warriors to the kits, and then she says quietly, "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."
"Of course not, Knottedstar!"

"Good. There will be a meeting at the Highfall at sundown. I trust you all will be there." She looks down. "That includes this little one, here." She walks off, tail flicking, and I look up to see the sun is slowly descending behind the trees.

We scuttle over to the Highfall, fur bright in the scarlet of the setting sun.

Knottedstar is already there, as are the warriors, who seem to have been informed already. She looks from us to them, then them to us, and her expression is warm and caring. "I see we have a new member tonight."

Jade swells with pride and my hackles raise. The whole clan's eyes are on us, and they seem just as hostile as I do when they scent the kittypet smell emanating from her.

Knottedstar catches their attention with one quick 'Ehem'. Her speech is concise, but the whole clan is silent the moment she starts speaking. "I understand all of you are apprehensive about the coming days. The clan has been left in the dark, a darkness that predates Shadowstar's death and though I can not bring the light, I can at least lead you there. It is my new deputy who will have to be the light of this new clan. I am old, and my leadership may be far more brief than I had hoped. Regardless, I am sure this cat will be a good choice. My new deputy will be Amberstreak."

The cats cheer loudly. Amberstreak walks up to the Highfall with

her tail swishing. If nothing else, she's the popular choice, and the clan seems pleased with the choice. There's a different smell in the air. The cats are not as angry or standoffish as they were before. For the first time since I was born, everyone seems... relaxed. Happy.

Is this what change feels like?
The thought creeps into my mind and takes root before I can pull it up, and the more it grows the less terrible it seems in my mind.

Maybe Shadowstar was a bad leader.

The other cats might be right, I might not have killed her... but I might have pushed her over. Not what I said or what I did, but simply what I am is what terrified her most.

I am the golden-eyed cat, and maybe... maybe that's not such a bad thing.

Promises

I never get to talk to my brother anymore. Usually, he has up to three she cats trailing him, but today it's just Sharpkit, who is clearly a veteran at haggling him. I don't like to admit it, but sometimes, I feel jealous of my brother. It burns like a fire in the pit of my throat, an unquenchable envy that I never asked for.

Novakit can not always be by my side. I can't always be lost with him or in my own mind, trying to consult... them.

Parts of me whisper about him without my permission.

He could be lying about the songs.

He could be lying about everything.

He just loves the attention, nothing more.

Most of me denies it, knowing my kindhearted brother would never lie to anyone. Even if it's weird, I have to believe him.

Another part of me... isn't so convinced.

"Watching your brother?"

My fur prickles as I turn around to see Knottedstar eying me with interest. I try not to seem startled and resume licking my paw.

Her knowing eyes, which are a vivid brown, fix on my paw, then she sweeps around to stare me in the eye. "You know, there are many ways to gain the respect of your clanmates. Training is one. Making new friends is another. Sitting in silent envy and letting yourself drown in negativity is certainly not one. However, I'd like to help you. Why are you jealous of your brother?"

"He has a lot of friends... and I'm not jealous." I say plainly. I feel

bad just saying it, because I am jealous and Knottedstar seems to get this immediately.

She gives me a curt nod as she replies, "Well, so do you. I've seen you kits play. Where are Nettlekit and Novakit?"

"They're both..." I look towards the nursery. They said they had something they wanted to do up there, a 'tom thing' that probably involves a ploy to get out of camp. They both know I can't join them in anything risky, lest the Shadowstar incident begin to look like anything besides an unlucky coincidence. "Busy." I finish.

"Ah." She says. "Titanfoot?"
Titanfoot's ears prick. She's sitting with Jade, who is eagerly chasing Titanfoot's flicking tail. Jade's fur rustles when she sees me. "Is there a problem?" asks Titanfoot.

"Are you training that kit battle moves?" Knottedstar says dryly.

"She wanted to learn how to be an asset to the clan. She's a natural!" Titanfoot boasts. An enthusiastic Jadekit puffs her throat out. "Yeah!" she says with a purr. "I am a natural, aren't I?"

Knottedstar nods profoundly. "Absolutely. You'll fit in fine with Rushkit here. She's a natural fighter as well."

"Me?" I ask. "I mean, yes. Me."
"Yes. She is under my tutelage. We will be training together." Knottedstar says. "Come along." She tells me in a muted tone, bringing her head closer to mine. We walk off and I feel warmth rising within me at the quiet admiration the leader is giving me. She stops at a knotted tree at the edge of camp. "I've been watching you, golden eyes."

My snout scrunches up and my fur prickles in fright. Was all of that a ruse to get me over here? Is she angry? "I didn't- I'm not-"
Knottedstar looks stern. "You're not what? Not the cat in the prophecy? You have memories that go back beyond your own life. Souls tossing within your mind. Only a few rises and falls of the moon you could hear Shadowstar's soul and find out about WillowClan."

"But then... she died. A prophecy cat wouldn't do something like that. They don't do bad things."

"So we wish." Knottedstar's tail swings. She turns around, and seeing no one within earshot, continues, "They only tell the good stories. All clans have failed legends. Mistakes. Shadowstar letting it go vocal was the first problem, naturally. DragonClan used to have swarms of cats with irregularities. In my youth, I encountered quite a few, including DragonClan's last leader, Crabstar. He and one of my predecessors, Oliveblaze, were very close."

I tilt my head at the name. Even though Shadowstar's leadership had been short, rarely was her father's name passed around. "Was something wrong with him?"

"Well, some would say he kept his emotions guarded. Others believed that his heart was literally torn from him in his youth during a mishap in the tunnels. There were accounts of him showing no reaction after extended exposure to pain, being incapable of smiling, even some as drastic as being slashed in the heart and not bleeding."

"So he was a monster, like me?" I ask, concerned.

"You very well could become a monster, Rushkit. Luckily for you, you could also be like Crabstar. He ended up leader and in time learned to love. Some say the tunnelkeeper found a way to cure him. However, you don't know if someone will be around to fix you, so... I guess I'll have to teach you to fix yourself."
"You can do that?"

"Yes. Can I count on your cooperation?"

I look into her eyes, certainty flooding my heart. "Whatever it takes."

(oh man is this one short. sorry guys, really really sorry. I've been a huge asshole as of late and I've really fallen out of writing to boot so I'm going to try to get back on the writing train. hopefully this worldbuilding will appease the audience)

Instinctive

"Faster!" Knottedstar yowls.

I swipe the tree trunk again, eyes narrowed and claws unsheathed. A barrage of small wooden shards is severed from the tree, many of them hitting my pelt like hail.

"Again!"

I swipe it again indignantly. I haven't even made a dent in the trunk, but more splinters of bark fly off before my small claws, giving me a sense of accomplishment. I breathe out, turning around. "Was that better?"

Knottedstar nods. "Your reaction time is getting a lot better. Now, we need to work on that temper of yours."

"I don't have a temper!" I snap.

Knottedstar looks down at me and says quietly, "Yes, yes, which is why you just snapped at me."

I open my mouth and then shut it. I hiss a little under my breath, eyes darting away to stare at the tree. My ears lower to my head in embarrassment. "I'm sorry, Knottedstar."

"It's not me you should be saying sorry to, anyways." Knottedstar says quietly. Her eyes flick away, subtly gazing at my brother before returning her focus to me.

My hackles stand straight up. "I... but he..."

"We'll return to this later. You're dismissed for the day." Knottedstar walks away to a group of warriors who had been watching us with dubious expressions for a while. I breathe a long sigh of relief. I'm still in no mood to apologize to my brother, especially because I haven't done anything.

We've just drifted apart, and anyone without fluff in their brain can tell he was the first to break away. I watch him talking to Sunpaw and Jadekit and I feel something welling up deep within me, something like sadness but bitterer, harder on the tongue... envy.

"There you are." Novakit purrs, bounding over to me. My head snaps around to see three cats running my way by his side, including Crowkit and the solemn Goldkit, as well as Nettlekit, who still looks like he hasn't been groomed since Shadowstar died.

Warmth shoots up my spine and I feel a purr escape me as Novakit's head finds my own, his fur brushing my whiskers and then my cheeks. "Nice to see you, gold eyes."

"Nice to see you too, intergalactic hairball." I say happily.

"Thank StarClan you're done. We thought that would never be over," complains Nettlekit.

Goldenkit and Crowkit exchange looks but say nothing. Goldenkit is now Goldendapple, a warrior of DarkClan, and she and Crowsong are both very shy and very quiet. They're a stark contrast to the loud, strong deputy and leader who are only silent by each other's sides, when they need not speak.

I swoon over the image for a second before Nettlekit feels the need to open his mouth again. "Between Knottedstar's special training and you mooning over your brother, it's a wonder you have any time to spend with us at all."

"I don't moon over him! He's my brother! That's *gross*!" I snap, pouncing on Nettlekit in indignation.

"Yeah, Nettlekit!" Crowkit says, suddenly bold. She jumps on top of him and me, consequently, and within seconds there's a huge pile of kits where Nettlekit used to be. We writhe around, trying to get on top of each other and gasping for air, but I'm stuck by my tail and Nettlekit is stuck by his everything.

Nettlekit screeches for mercy: "I can't breathe! I can't breathe!" and miraculously, someone finds it in their heart to let him up. The

DarkClan cats sit facing each other, all of us unsure of what to do next, and Novakit nudges me forwards.

"What? What do you want?" I ask, still breathing heavily from the kit pile.

"You have to show us your warrior skills." whispers Goldenkit, gesturing for me to demonstrate.

I light up like a firefly immediately, nodding to them to follow as I dash to a nearby tree. I unsheathe my claws and jump back, then slash forwards in the way Knottedstar showed me, placing more power into my swipe and slicing straight down.

Bark flies everywhere once again, and I light up, tail flicking happily.

Warriors watch from a distance, all of them enjoying a quick midday break. I recognize Snowpelt and my mother, Scarletsky, who watch approvingly.

One by one, I guide my clanmate's claws into the tree bark, treating it as if it were a spiteful enemy. They all exchange bright purrs and exclaim loudly as they get it, feeling the power of each strike even though we're only slicing bark.

I look at Novakit, and he looks back, and we nod.

He turns grimly to the other three cats, who notice his sudden change in disposition and stop practicing. "I have bad news." he says. "The clan has been corrupted by evil badgers who have taken all of our clanmates' forms and the only way to get them back is to send the badgers back to where they came from."
All of us fall silent, waiting for the order. We understand perfectly what has to be done.

Crowkit's eyes are alight with silent excitement. Goldenkit nods. Thistlekit unsheathes his thorn-sharp claws. I nudge Novakit. "Whatever it takes, my love." I say dramatically.

"DarkClan, attack!" Novakit yells, and we're off through the clan, attacking tails and bushes, twigs and leaves. Warriors gasp in shock

and amusement as we show off our battle skills. One by one, they file out, remarking on how strong we are, how smart we are, how much they'd love to take us on patrol with skills like that.

Then we're alone again, but we're not really alone anymore. The clan is closer than ever and we have talent, skill, and pride to spare. We clean up everyone's nest in the bush and rim each one with feathers, then we climb to the top of the bush and try to make it so all five of us can balance at once, then we practice our amazing reflexes by playing mossball.

It's far past sunset when Scarletsky bends down to tell us all that the sun is sleeping and so must we, but I find myself cold tucked against her side. I sleep on the outside, as usual, because it's really stuffy on the inside now that all of the kits just have one queen, but there are other reasons I don't want to be here.

My claws twitch. I need to be practicing.

No one will miss me for just a few seconds, will they?

Seeing no one else is awake, I leave the den and tumble out into the camp. My tree still waits, still scarred from today's encounter with my claws.

I'm about to get started on practice when I hear whispering.

"We better not get caught."

"No one will be looking for two kits in the tunnels! It'll be our secret!"
"Why do you want to go down there anyways?"

"You can hear the symphony if you can hear souls. It's a special place. You know, for both of us."

I turn around. "You won't be hearing anything but scolding from one of your elders after this one!"

"She shouldn't be up this late. Why is she up this late?" hisses Jadekit, recoiling.

"Rushkit, please let us through..." Sparrowkit pleads quietly.

"Oh no. Oh no oh no oh no. I'm doing this." Jadekit says, sauntering right up to me so she's in my face. "Why are you out here, fish-brain?"

"Jadekit." My brother begs.

I stand still, hackles raised, unmoving.

"You must be really desperate to be 'special' if you think that sitting out here clawing at a tree will help you." she continues.
"Jadekit."

"You... you want to own your brother! You're jealous of him being loved by anyone else because Novakit and you have a horrible relationship!" She screeches at me, panic in her eyes.
"I don't have to sneak out to prove mine!" I yell back, my voice high and shrill.

"Jadekit, why do you hate her so much?" Sparrowkit asks. "You keep asking about her but you won't tell me why..."

She's whining now, a high pitched sound as she steps backwards from me. "She's a monster, she's going to kill me again, she's going to kill us all-"

"Again?" Sparrowkit reels.

"Again." I confirm.

He looks at Jade closely. The green eyes, the black fur, the snappy voice and the familiar long fur, and I can tell he's angling his ears forward to 'hear' her.

"Shadowstar, is that-"

Jade's eyes widen. "I... what? No! What are you talking about?"
"You sound like her."

"I have no idea what you're saying." she whines.

There are footsteps on the horizon. I hear commotion in the warrior's den. "What in StarClan..." It's Snowpelt. Just another warrior coming to check on us. Fear rises in my throat and my eyes dart around, looking for an escape.

"What's going on?"

Jadekit looks into our eyes and then whispers, "Demon kits. Both of you. You- you have no idea what you're capable of. How dangerous you are. You ruined this. You ruined everything!"

I look at Sparrowkit, terrified. "She's a reincarnation?"

Sparrowkit backs away from me too. "I knew I knew her from somewhere, but I assumed we were meant for each other, but she's- and she remembered everything, this can't be-"
He stutters many things I don't know or recognize, but I can feel the golden eyed monster within me staring out at Jadekit and both of us are locked in the same emotion, pure and irrational fear.

I stare at an abomination, and she stares at a monster, and then she's gone, running out into the forest at a speed no kit could handle.

Snowpelt is accompanied by three other warriors. I recognize Carbonfrost, my father, looking stern and disappointed.
"What's going on?" asks someone quietly.

"Go after that kit!" yells another.

"She's heading for the tunnels! Get Cinderblaze!"

Scarletsky approaches us, wrapping us both close with her tail. I feel relief as the other side of me slips back under without another thought. "My kits, my poor, poor kits. We heard screaming, but we came out to see this... I hoped a day like this would never come..."

"What do you mean?" Sparrowkit asks, anxiously. "What's going on?"

"That was no ordinary cat. We were foolish not to realize it sooner."
"Why was she here? Why did Shadowstar kill herself? How did she

get back?" I ask, a stream of questions flooding from me with no end in sight.

Knottedstar walks by and yells to the whole camp. "Get up, everyone! We have an emergency: the tunnels are breaking."

Archaic

Knottedstar hisses orders at other cats, and around me the other kits wake up one by one. The whole camp staggers to life before breaking into a dead sprint as cats join patrols, warriors rushing out of camp. Apprentices are held back by firm tails and I see Emeraldlight stagger out of the elder's den. She herself used to be a tunnelkeeper, and she says something quietly to Knottedstar before lowering her head. I can't make out anything in the commotion and I resist the urge to rush out there and begin asking questions.

"Cinderblaze, I relieve you of your duty as tunnelkeeper." I hear Knottedstar say, loudly enough that even the kits in the nursery can hear it, and the camp turns, still murmuring, still questioning, but now all of them are watching her. Knottedstar is ready to sink or swim under the pressure of her clan.

"Emeraldlight, you'll take the patrol still here into the tunnels. I've already sent out a patrol on the overland, but we need to check down there. I have no idea what could lie down there, but this could mean the end of the clan if cats who died this recently are coming back. Even reincarnations themselves are very rare, much less one of a former leader."

"Do you think it has something to do with the prophecy Shadowstar recieved?"
"It could have everything to do with that." Knottedstar says, "Or possibly just negligence. Either way, it is our duty to fix this. DragonClan, to the tunnels!"

The patrol leaves briskly, leaving the remaining cats in camp to talk amongst themselves, over Knottedstar's orders to 'head back to sleep' and Cinderblaze's wailing. Eventually, Knottedstar walks right towards us, sitting herself down in the nursery. Carbonfrost is already there, licking Scarletsky's pelt, and Scarletsky has her eyes almost closed and her fur standing on end.

"Are you going to tell us what's going on?" I ask eagerly. "Please do!"
"They'll be scared senseless." Carbonfrost warns.

"They deserve to know. We told them about the flood, didn't we?" Knottedstar says, her eyes narrowed. I've never seen her so angry.

"This isn't the time to be telling stories!" Carbonfrost snaps. "The flood was fact. We all know what water is and why it's dangerous. We have no idea what we're up against here, and this is hardly the time to go planting ideas in kits' heads!"
"We've sent the patrols. All we can do is wait." Knottedstar replies coolly, facing down the usually levelheaded Carbonfrost as if he was a disobedient apprentice.

"That's not true! We could-" He starts, but his own mate cuts him off.
"She has a point." admits Scarletsky.

"Hmph." Knottedstar flicks her tail to close the matter, then turns to us. All of us are shocked silent by the chaos going on outside, and though we are older kits and are supposed to be fearless, we cluster together. Sparrowkit is sitting a little ways away, looking out at the confusion and I can tell he's thinking about Jadekit.

"What's going on?" asks Crowkit, snuggling timidly against Scarletsky's side.

"Are the warriors fighting?" asks Nettlekit.
"Are we going to die?" asks Goldenkit, and since no one can top that, we sit silently and wait for the answer.

Knottedstar answers none of our questions. "I have a story for you," she says, as if we hadn't talked at all. "I believe it will explain everything. This is the story about how our path diverged from that of the other clans. It has been told to you in pieces, and the tales themselves regularly rest between myth and fact, fluctuating slightly depending on who is doing the telling. Though I walked the tunnels when I was young, and I was inquisitive, I have not been able to piece together everything. To the best of my knowledge, these are the events that led up to the making of the tunnels:

Long ago, in the age of the Ancient leaders, when we lived at our first camp and the black fox had just departed these woods, there lived two kits who were born of the earth. The two of them were called in their dreams to a world beneath the soil, whispered to by starry spirits, and eventually coaxed into what appeared to be a rabbit den but was in fact something far more sinister and powerful.

The two kits found an entire labyrinth of tunnels that had been hidden beneath their feet and indeed, the feet of their ancestors since they had found the territory. The kits, being very young and foolish despite their potential, hid it from their clanmates and upon discovery of their secret claimed they had helped shape the tunnels.

Their clanmates, while seeing the use of this discovery, were not well suited to the damp air or unforgiving darkness and left them to use it. The two kits, now warriors, while their names have been lost to time, became guardians of the tunnels until their deaths. They are what we now consider to be the founders of the tunnels.

However, upon their death, the tunnels were left once again deserted. This was of no concern to the clan, for at this point, despite their strange origin, they were just that; tunnels, with nothing dangerous or otherworldly about them. No one knows quite when or how this changed, but many agree the tunnels' change to vividly haunted occurred after Ashleap's death.

Ashleap was one of the clan's finest medicine cats, however, she was haunted by the ability to see the dead. She learned that unlike in other clans, cats here seem to come back over and over again, with only shadows of themselves ever reaching StarClan. She wanted to find an answer but there simply was none at the time, and the visions began showing her things she did not want to see. There were kits reborn from murderers, friends who had once slit her throat, and enemies who she had once been in love with. She attempted to shut her sight off, going so far as attempting to gouge her eyes out, but StarClan would not let her close them. She was only able to turn it off for small amounts of time between violent fits where she would cry out and even attack her own clanmates.

She became too dangerous. After one fit, she descended into the tunnels and died there. This dangerous power sunk into the earth

and the tunnels began to be a place for StarClan on this earth, similar to the Moonpool up to the far north.

This power could easily have never haunted the cats of DragonClan again, but many, many moons later, the dead began manifesting even more powerfully, appearing in the dreams of cats and promising them secrets and power in return for their cooperation. These spirits had been stuck in the tunnels for years, often cats who had discovered them but died down there and never been found. A young cat named Lunarpaw found the tunnels again and began hunting these spirits and the cats attached to them, hoping to break the contract between them before it corrupted them.

While she eventually became Lunarshine, the first official tunnelkeeper, and discovered many more things in the tunnels, StarClan had grown hostile to us. Many of the dead were restless or bitter over their imprisonment and many more were looking for a way out, uncontent with seeing the cats below suffer endlessly. When the tunnels were neglected, these demons began to take physical form, like the dark forest cats of the very oldest tales, and return to haunt us. It became necessary to have a tunnelkeeper down below us, watching over us and the spirits and keeping everything as it was originally supposed to be: just us and StarClan, nothing more."

The kits look to each other, understanding a lot of it. It was a long story, and definitely a lot to take in, but the names seemed familiar. Dread rose in my heart. Was *I* born from those restless souls? Was that what took over me when Shadowstar and I fought, something capable of making a kit stand up to a leader?

"Wait," said Sparrowkit, "You said the cats were corrupted by the spirits? Doesn't StarClan care about us?"

"A desperate cat is willing to try anything."
"What about the power?" I ask. "Did they promise they could lead clans, or rule the forest and all the land beyond that, or something else?"

"No, the StarClan cats preferred to give more immediate talents. There were many reports of cats being able to do things beyond the

laws of our world, such as hearing souls, for an example..."
Sparrowkit flinches visibly as she says this. "...but these powers slowly turned them insane and the hunting of the Corrupted occured for a reason. Let's just say we were not meant to break the laws set out before us."

"Knottedstar! We need you out here, right now! Peacockwish is back and she says her patrol is in trouble down there."
Knottedstar gets up. "I'll leave them to you, Scarletsky."

Scarletsky nods gently, wrapping her tail around as many kits as she can. I writhe under the gentle brush of her tail, still terrified from the story.

"She was lying, right? Nothing bad is going to happen." Goldenkit insists.

Scarletsky exhales. "No. She was right. There are many bad things that DragonClan cats have done, including exploring things and places not meant for us. We pay for their curiosity every day."
"Are you telling us not to explore? That sounds like the opposite of what everyone tells us to do. You know, be yourself, be strong, be brave?" Nettlekit says dryly, clearly unimpressed by the story.

"I'm telling you to respect boundaries." Scarletsky looks out towards the clearing, where Cinderblaze stands in a submissive pose with fear plastered to her face. "Or else. Now go to sleep."

We all begin to nestle into our dens, afraid of what might happen next, and I can feel the pulsing of the other kits' hearts alongside mine. Turn as I might, my heart will not slow and I can not close my eyes.

Eventually, I give up and decide to try something else. The world goes black around me as I close my eyes and with one thought, I ask the inside of my mind, *Hello?*

Hello.

Are... are you Ashleap?

Yes, I am... but I am not alone.

Repennance

My mind bursts with frustration.

I have to tell Knottedstar.

I can't do it.

Yes you can.

No I can't.

You have to!

She'll be afraid of you. You're just as dangerous as she was afraid of.

I don't know who's doing the talking anymore. I don't keep track of who squabbles in the space between my ears, ever since I learned what I really am.

It's been two weeks since Jadekit fled into the tunnels and my mind has never been louder and the clan has never seemed so morally ambiguous. There's those who want to save Jadekit and a few who want to keep her out of the camp at any cost, and both side's morals are questionable.

They know I'm a freak already, but Sparrowkit is far luckier. He's already played down his talent as a 'quirk' he's grown out of. I watch him chatting idly with the apprentices. Sunpaw is down in a hunting crouch, demonstrating for him, while Rubypaw and Hazelpaw brag about their own hunting skills. I watch Cloudfrost and Duststorm come in and take them away. They exchange an anxious glance before padding off.

"Do you think they're going to get their warrior assessments?" asks Emberstreak, sitting near myself and the other kits (by the river, which the nursery is close to), sunning herself on the bank.

By her side, Snowpelt, who is watching the river for fish, mutters, "I hope so. They never do anything but gossip. What a waste of prey."

Emberstreak flattens her ears. "Well, they're my waste of prey, and you should at least show a little respect to my kits."
Snowpelt's ears flatten. "I'll start respecting them when they start pulling their weight."

Emberstreak catches my gaze, and she snaps, "What are you looking at, Rushkit? Maybe my kits aren't the only ones who need to learn respect."

I open my mouth but only manage to murmur a quick "Sorry" before heading off in the opposite direction, stopping to rest by the DarkClan bush. It's a lot more cramped these days, which is a sign recruiting is going well, or potentially just that we're getting bigger.

"Are you alright, Rushcall?" My ears perk as I hear the sound of Novakit's voice from behind. It's soft and genuinely concerned, so unlike the dry echoed tone of warriors saying it to kits they barely know.

I spring to my feet, eyes wide, and reply, "Y-yes, Novastar."

"Doesn't look like it." he says quietly. He shrugs it off nonchalantly and meets my gaze again, this time with an air of excitement replacing the gentle caring. "We're going to go on a patrol of our territory. You should come!"

Crowkit is standing a ways off, clearly waiting for Novakit and I. I'm surprised Nettlekit isn't there, and neither is Goldenkit, but I'm sure there's probably something else they could do around camp. I mean, I always find something to do, but that's because I'm a 'good listener'. I pad after them, patrolling the same twenty-six trees that border our camp while pretending to be profoundly interested in landmarks we already know about.

When we get back to the nursery, the other kits are already there and all of them are sharing tongues. Usually, sharing tongues in the nursery includes lots of play fighting and teasing, but no one attacks me. I haven't been hurt since I was little and Nettlekit chipped my

ear (which still has the cut in it, my mother says it may never heal). Novakit is always watching over me, and he takes on the honor of fighting for me, though my teeth and claws are needle sharp and my training from Knottedstar makes me about as deadly as a seven moon old apprentice.

However, tonight, I don't particularly want to fight. I lay myself down and as the nursery calms down, I am hit with a startling realization.

I can't sleep.

Insomnia hits me harder than a badger paw to the face and I sit with my face down beneath my mother and kits struggling to sleep, but slowly, I can feel their breathing relax and the night continues on at the pace of a speeding snail. Crickets come out, warriors go to sleep, the night guard is decided to make sure nothing nasty comes out of the tunnels. It was three warriors the first night, but as it drains the workforce quickly, it's only one warrior in quick shifts now. There are about six guards a night, so it cycles through quickly.

The second guard is coming out when the bush rustles. It's a small motion, one no one who wasn't paying attention wouldn't have caught, but I noticed simply because it was the *DarkClan* bush and I was thinking about DarkClan and how it would be way better to be down there right now, sleeping in the DarkClan bush like all the kits in DarkClan keep saying we'll do.

A kit sneaks out of the bush. Angry green eyes meet mine and claws unsheathe.

Jadekit is back in the camp.

The guard hasn't noticed her yet. The shape, mottled by moonlight, just so happens to be Titanfoot, who would love to hear about it more than anyone.

My mouth opens and then closes. Jadekit retreats back into the bush and peeks out again once she sees I'm silent.

She mouths something to me and looks down at her claws. She's challenging me. My fur prickles, but I try to keep it flat. Should I run to her?

The first thought is that *I've been through the exact same scenario before.*

Nighttime escapades? Potential peril? Well, I didn't leave camp last time, but there's no telling where she'll go now.

My second thought is that *I could live the rest of my life regretting not going after her.*

Jade turns and disappears into the bushes.

"H-hey! Come back!"

Titanfoot's on guard, and though she doesn't hear the tiny footsteps and slight rustle of the bush, she sure as StarClan hears me yell after her. "Rushkit?"

"Jadekit was in the bush!" I exclaim, waking up more warriors who realize that once again I've gotten myself into the middle of something I shouldn't.

Titanfoot looks incredulous, but upon sniffing the air, she looks vaguely hopeful. "She really was here..."
Knottedstar rushes out. "Are we in danger?"

"Just Jadekit. We... we should go after her." Titanfoot says urgently.

"She'll be heading for the tunnels. Take Carbonfrost and Duststorm, they're some of our fastest warriors. I'll guard for the time being."

Knottedstar narrows her eyes and watches me, but she says nothing. It's common with her, as if she expects my eyes to be able to talk back. She sits guard silently as the warriors head out, Titanfoot urgently pacing ahead, and Duststorm and Carbonfrost looking exasperated and quite tired, despite potentially being startled awake. Neither of them are in favor of having another dangerous kit on their paws, but overt murder is definitely not an option.

Knottedstar watches them leave and turns back towards the exit. "You should head back to sleep."

"I-" I say, but I cut myself off, not knowing what to say.

This time, the bushes don't rustle until it's too late. A blur of gray fur jumps at me, claws extended, and Knottedstar is halfway across camp. She bolts across immediately, but already it's too late. Jadekit dives straight for my throat, hoping potentially to kill me.

They say time slows down when you're about to die, but I took everything- every little detail- in within a single split second and then it was all rushing past at a blur.

I remember a voice.

Not today.

A very different energy fills me from Ashleap's, an energy fast and painful instead of ethereal and warm. It shoots through me like a million bolts of lightning and my body twists to dodge her, just in time to expose my throat. Knottedstar bolts over to stop the next attack, but my reactions are split second and as Jadekit jumps for my throat, my claws extend and I pounce upwards to drive my paws like a guillotine straight down into her back, aiming for the jugular vein. She does not wail or meow. The sound that comes from her mouth is one pure, intensely long scream that keeps going until her breath stops and her head rests silently in a pool of her own blood.

Knottedstar throws me off the body, getting her own paws bloodied. The others are awoken, once again beginning to congregate, and Knottedstar tells them with great pride, "Rushkit has just saved us all from a vicious rogue attack!"

Deciever

The clan does not speak when they see the body. Those who were in favor of Jadekit leaving and the cats who were in favor of trying to save her both are terrified when they see the small body, the blood on Knottedstar's paws, and the blood on my own paws. Knottedstar looks up at the clan, and for a second, there's a flicker of fear or perhaps remorse in her eyes.

My own heart is beating wildly, and the gaze of the clan shifts to me. I find myself growing closer to Knottedstar's paws, but she offers no comfort.
"You killed her." mutters Cloudfrost.

"What happened?"
"Knottedstar, that's a kit!" Titanfoot says angrily.
"No. As much as I'd like to believe otherwise, it was not. Jade returned to camp and went straight for the nursery, hoping to attack the kits. Upon seeing Rushkit, Jade flung herself at her with the full intent of killing Rushkit. It was only due to Rushkit's talents as well as my training that she was able to defend herself and unfortunately this also meant killing Jade. Rushkit was fighting primarily at my command, and as you can see, I helped." She holds up one bloody paw. "Anyone who would like to disagree with my orders, please step forwards."

No one moves, not even Titanfoot. The kits in the nursery are watching too now, all of them looking at my battle scars with shock.

"Let this be a lesson to all of us: the tunnel spirits are not only restless but dangerous, and if we do not destroy them, they will destroy us." Knottedstar hisses. "We must increase the patrols again. Night guards will shift to two cats at a time. Do I make myself clear?"

"You're worse than Shadowstar," hisses someone from the back.

Knottedstar wheels around, eyes narrowed and dangerous. She catches no one's gaze and no one knows who the ominous voice belongs to.

"Am I?" replies Knottedstar. "We all knew Shadowstar. She would've let everything happen. The kits in the nursery would be dead right now."

The clan murmurs in quiet distress, but it's doubtful that they're all convinced.

"You think that Jade was harmless. Well, I have to ask the older warriors- do you remember the last time tunnel cats were allowed to thrive in this clan? Blood stained the clan's children red. A warrior was killed bringing down one of the last of the anomalies. Anything and everything can be dangerous when backed into a corner."
"It's true." Carbonfrost says. "I remember."
"As do I. I cared for one of the kits myself. It is a blessing that my own children, Rubypaw and Hazelpaw, still survive to this day." Amberstreak stands up, and Rubypaw and Hazelpaw stand with her.

One by one, clan cats stand up, offering painfully vague stories about this kit, the other kit, how doom fell upon the clan, but not one bothers to go into detail. In fact, they all look as if going further would be immensely difficult, as if they've forgotten the rest of the story.

Knottedstar nods. "Regardless, we will bury the kit. Titanfoot, as her closest friend, I'd imagine you'd like to. However, this dark spirit had memories of Shadowstar. If any of you would like to think of this as an end to her as well, you may help."

"That wasn't my mom." Novakit says, "It was a monster."
"If you are sure of that, then you have made yourself safe from her tricks." Knottedstar purrs. "Very good."

I look around at the clan, but they aren't staring at me anymore. Somehow, with only a pawful of words, Knottedstar has managed to completely avert any blame from me. She looks down at me and grooms me with her tongue as the warriors return to sleep, one by

one. Rubypaw and Hazelpaw stay to help bury the kit's ragged body.

Knottedstar returns to her den without another word to me, but still appalled by her brevity, I follow, my eyes intent on her lithe and powerful form.

"How did you..." I say.

"Quieter. How did I what?" She curls up into her den.

"How did you make them less angry at me?" I ask, shuffling my paws. My heart is still pounding from what I did, though the spirit within me who did the deed for me numbs the pain. Whatever lives within me had murdered too many times to see it as anything more than a sacrifice for the greater good.

"I just told them what they wanted to hear. That you're a hero, that the death was not your fault, and that Jade was too much of a monster to be saved." Her eyes open but she does not move.

"Does that make you a liar?" I ask, but regret the words soon as I've said them. Knottedstar's eyes slit and I back up, not wanting to infuriate her. The power and anger she radiates is terrifying even before she has opened her mouth.

Eventually, I catch her quiet speech again, her tone barely shifted. "It makes me an efficient leader. Perhaps I am a tyrant, or perhaps a martyr in the name of the safety of my clanmates, but I tell you this, my job is to keep everyone safe. Sometimes claws are not the most effective weapon to do so."

I nod. "I wish I could do that."

"Maybe you will. There are things within you that could make you a powerful speaker. You have three lives worth of experience to draw from- both spirits I have seen within you and your own."

I turn to go, but curiousity and something deep within me turns me carefully back. I feel another's words through my own mouth. "Knottedstar, what's the difference between Jade and I? We're both anomalies, right?"

"Yes, but StarClan said that you're important to us, didn't they?"

There's no other answer I need, at least not for now. Satisfied, I return to my den, and fall asleep looking up at the stars, wondering if Jade got there or if her angry spirit still lies beneath the tunnels.

***

It's a beautiful morning, but the sun is still dyed red as it rises and the sky reflects that. The trees, almost empty of leaves, clutch the blood colored sky in their ugly branches.

Novakit is standing outside, watching the warriors leave. I approach him cautiously, barely standing after last night. "That'll be us soon, right, Rushkit?"

"Oh... uh... what?" I say, barely awake. "We aren't warriors. We're just... just kits."

"We're five moons now. That just leaves one moon left, huh?" His tone is different now. He sounds impersonal and detached.

"It feels like a lot longer than that." I say, looking up at the trees. I don't want to meet his gaze.

"It might have been longer for you. You've got the other spirits within you, remember? How long have they been here?"

"Always." I answer, sure of my choice. "But that doesn't matter, right? It's just me now. I'm not them."

"Are you sure?"

"No." I say.

His face becomes longer, older, and changes to that of a she-cat. His body grows longer before me until all that's left is an unrecognizable gray cat with blue eyes. "Are you really sure?" she asks, her tone slightly sinister. "Didn't you enjoy it?"

"Enjoy what?"

"Murder."

Her claws unsheathe and tear through me as I scream loudly, begging for it to stop. I can feel her claws hit bone and my left back paw lashes out, hitting fur, and there's an 'oof!' as I hit Sparrowkit.

It was just a dream.

However, some part of me still believes that next time it might not be.

Guilt

"Rubypaw, Scorchpaw, and Hazelpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend this clan, even at the cost of your life?" Knottedstar calls in front of the silent clan. Despite recent events, everyone is still excited for the warrior ceremony of three of the apprentices. I'm sitting besides Sparrowkit and Novakit, though Sparrowkit tends to keep his distance.

"I do!" Rubypaw and Hazelpaw say, tails flicking in excitement.

"I do as well." Scorchpaw's voice is more solemn but it's obvious he puts a lot of faith in those words. The clan is looking at Rubypaw and Hazelpaw, and with one quick glance backwards he knows the clan can no longer trust him as a warrior after the recent issue with rogues.

Knottedstar knows their apprehension well, but she shows no sign of worry herself. The clan is watching her like ravenous wolves, yet she's calm. Once again I find myself in awe of how easily she handles them. "Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior names. Rubypaw, from this moment you will be known as Rubyshine. StarClan honors your creativity and kindness. Hazelpaw, from this moment you will be known as Hazelwhisker. StarClan honors your wit and loyalty. Scorchpaw, from this moment you will be known as Scorchclaw. StarClan honors your bravery and determination, and we welcome all three of you as full warriors of DragonClan."

"Rubyshine! Hazelwhisker! Scorchclaw! Rubyshine! Hazelwhisker! Scorchclaw!" The clan cheers them on enthusiastically, though Scorchclaw's name is a little quieter than that of the two clanborn cats' names and some cats on the edge aren't cheering at all.

Regardless of how many are cheering, they aren't the only reason the clan has to be thankful. Peacockwish has given birth to three of Duststorm's kits. He sits alone at the ceremony today, with his mate

in the nursery caring for the three kits. While Cherrykit and Maplekit share his brown fur, Jetkit's fur has Peacockwish's dark hues. Not one has opened their eyes and yet they are all irrevocably already part of us. I notice Duststorm slip away as the ceremony ends, and Amberstreak dashes amongst the warriors, giving everyone some duty or otherwise a well deserved break. Midday is warm despite the coming leafbare. Our coats for the cold months have grown in and this temperature, though not terribly warm, is at least comforting.

"That was great. I'm so glad that Rubyshine and Hazelwhisker finally got their ceremonies. I was kind of worried they would never get them." jokes Goldenkit. "You know, because they're always lying around doing nothing."

"I think they worked hard." Sparrowkit says indignantly. "You can hear it in their- I mean, they just seem so devoted, at least to each other. I wish I was that close with my littermates."

"You mean littermate. We're the only two left." I say coolly. Sparrowkit blinks. "I keep wrecking up today, don't I?"

"Intentionally? The clan is pretty convinced you're not a freak like Jade." Nettlekit says.

"Or Rushkit." Goldenkit says.

My eyes narrow but I say nothing.

"She's not a freak. She's deputy of DarkClan and she's a hero." Novakit's voice is shaking as he says it, as if he's about to cry, but knowing him it's more likely an unorthodox way of conveying a threat.

"Sunpaw says that Rushkit murdered her in cold blood and she got away with it because she's Knottedstar's favorite. Knottedstar thinks she's some deity sent down from StarClan."

"Freak or not, 'she' is right here and 'she' can speak for herself. What really happened, Rushkit?" Nettlekit's eyes gleam with mischief.

"What Knottedstar said." I answer as quietly as possible, but my

claws are unsheathed. I notice them after I've said it- I didn't unsheathe them myself. It's as if they knew I was speaking about her and unfurled of their own accord.

"Whatever. It's not worth arguing about. Why don't we go play a game?" Novakit groans, and I can tell he's trying to get me out of the ridiculous awkwardness of the situation. I send him a silent 'thank you' best I can, and I'm sure he notices.

We head towards the river, which is really more of a creek at the edge of camp. There's a large bank with lots of stones in it, which Novakit begins moving.

"What are you doing?" asks Crowkit, curious.

"We're going to play river kingdom! The water is like your territory, and you move the rocks to create a hole so the water comes in. Bonus points if you get a fish!"

"Okay then." Crowkit says, flipping a rock and then jumping back. "Wow! Those are gonna hurt if one falls on your paw! Everyone, be careful!"

"Yes, Crowsong." we all chime in happily. Nettlekit begins clearing rocks quickly, while Goldenkit strategically sweeps the bank for the best location. Novakit places himself in the middle and I find myself close to him and close to the river, where the best silt for digging is. Without as many rocks, it's far easier to shape and build the land.

Hazelwhisker comes to watch us and 'judge our hole building' alone with Scorchclaw, but he gives in and leaves her to watch while he builds a hole to put all of ours to shame.

"Can Sharpkit play?" asks Sparrowkit, who is sitting by Sharpkit's side, apprehensive.

"Of course Sharpkit can play. She's great at digging herself into holes." I snap back, hoping to make a quick retort.

"Same goes for you, murderer! No one's ever gonna-" She hisses, but is cut off by Hazelwhisker, who breaks us apart.

"I didn't come here to judge who could yap each other's faces off fastest, I came here to judge who could dig the best hole." says Hazelwhisker, trying to keep the peace. "Back to digging."

I start digging again scornfully, glancing ruefully at Sharpkit who is leaning on Sparrowkit in a lovey dovey way I just know makes him uncomfortable.

They'll end up together.

They have before.

It will not end well.

You should save him.

Save him, Rushkit! Save him with your claws! Kill her now before she ruins your brother's life!

Ignoring the voices best I can, I begin digging into the soil. Even before I start making the small canal to let the water in, Scorchclaw jumps in, cackling, and water rushes over the edges and fills my tiny water hole. I continue digging, but the dirt is now caking into mud on my claws. As I keep digging, the red dirt churns into the water and it begins to look like blood.

I dig faster, but the blood is running down my paws now, the silt caking between my claws like chunks of flesh, and the hole is now full of blood and I'm digging into Jadekit's neck as she screams endlessly, crying for me to stop it, begging for me to let go and I yell, stabbing my claws in. "Just stop already! Go away! Go away!" I look up and no one has noticed my outrage except Sparrowkit, who has turned around with remorseful eyes. My reflection within the water, which has settled now, has golden eyes.

It doesn't matter how you try to hide it, Rushkit. You're still a filthy murderer and everyone hates you.

"Scorchclaw got a fish! Scorchclaw got a fish!" All the kits are yelling excitedly and cheering for Scorchclaw as he pounds the fish relentlessly but all the joy has gone out of the activity for me. Without a word, I return to the nursery and lie down.

The kits are in there, all of them mewling and squirming around. As I lie there, oneof them makes its way up to me. I recognize his jet black pelt, which is beautiful but not as vibrant as his mother's. Despite this, he's quite the handsome kit. I wonder fondly if I was this innocent and small after the flood. To my surprise, as he sits there, watching me admire him, his tiny eyes blink open and gaze back into my own. "Hello."

"Hello, Jetkit." I say, still in shock. "What do you think?"

"You look a lot better when I have my eyes open." he purrs.

"Eyes? Open?" Peacockwish says loudly, rushing over to her kit's side. "Jetkit! Your eyes! You did it!"
"I did it, I did it, I did it!" Jetkit repeats happily.

Though it's not my joy, I find myself just as happy as the small family as they rejoice over the tremendous accomplishment. There's a warmth that comes with the simple first steps to growing up, and part of me doesn't care if the other kits ever come back.

I just want this back.

But you can't have it.

Ascended

Storm clouds flicker overhead, the dusty plain below filled with cats. I stand at the top of the hill and look down at them, a larger gray cat by my side. Her fur is gray, but tinted gold so that the looks almost like the storm clouds rolling overhead. Below us, the cats moan and wail, calling out for others who can not hear them.

I recognize the ghostly shape of Jadekit, bleeding dark black liquid onto the ground. Beside her is a large ginger cat who looks a little like Titanfoot.

"Who are they?" I ask the larger cat.

What has been.

"Why are they crying?"

They mourn for the loss of their memory. They are doomed to be forgotten.

The cats notice us, partly due to my voice, which echoes over the barren landscape, and they begin crawling my way. Some have lost limbs, others have too many limbs, and some are deformed in other ways. Not one of them is quite as they must have been in life. I can feel their clammy breath as they draw nearer, towering over me, mouths open to show off infinitely many teeth...

We have lingered too long here.

"Wake up, Rushkit!" calls Sparrowkit, and I blink open my eyes to find that once more, my travels have been naught but a dream. I breathe a sigh of relief, but find that immediately replaced by crankiness towards my brother. I look outside. The warriors are barely awake. Only the dawn patrol has left by now.

"Why did you wake me up so early?" I mutter crankily.

"Today's the big day!" he mews happily.

"What... big... that's today?!" I ask, eyes widening in shock. "Why didn't you wake me up earlier?"

"I've been pushing you around since the sun rose. You wouldn't budge an inch!" he complains. His demeanor is suddenly far more serious. "Is something wrong?"
"My dreams keep getting more and more vivid." I tell him quietly.

"So have mine." he whispers back. "What do you dream about?"

"I dream about weird landscapes with sinister looking cats whose names I forget every morning. There's this gray one, I'm pretty sure she's Ashleap, and a lot of the cats look a lot like our clanmates, but they have extra limbs and are all screaming out in pain. I don't know what's wrong with them."

"Oh, that's nothing like my dreams. Mine are all color and light and things I can't recognize."

"Do you think your dreams mean anything?"
"I know yours do." he replies solemnly. "Now come on! The other kits have been waiting for us since before sunrise."

I scamper after him until I reach the river, where all of us sit below the Highfall. The clan leader makes their way up the side of the rock ledge that separates us and the waterfall, and they talk from up there. A normal cat wouldn't be heard over the roar, so the leader's strength of voice and character is what allows them to roar louder than the waterfall.

It is said that though our ancestors lived far away near the mountains, Dragonstar, the first leader of our clan, came here when our clan was in great peril and talked to her clan about their origins. The story of DragonClan's origins is a lot like the tunnels: it's long, complex, and it's nearly impossible to tell how much of it is truth and how much is either myth or slander invented by later clan leaders. The early leaders of DragonClan often received the title after attacking their predecessor due to the risky politics of the time.

Leafstar, second leader of DragonClan, went as far as to appoint a

queen deputy, knowing that the humble Tigerlily would never attack her. *Of course, this backfired when Tigerstar, whose name was ironically suitable for her reign, was attacked by Echoheart, who was tired of being ignored and abused, and so blood stained the rocks until we had to move...*

I blink, realizing that not all the stories buzzing in my mind like bumblebees are ones that I learned myself.
"Are you ready?"

A warm presence graces my own, and I recognize Novakit before I adjust back to reality. I look down and my claws are unsheathed again. I sheathe them carefully.

"Ready as I'll ever be." I assure him.

"Same here." He shivers.

"All cats, gather beneath the Highfall for a clan meeting!" Knottedstar calls to the clan, and they slowly and amiably gather, knowing what today is well as we do.

Once everyone has gathered, I expect Knottedstar to go straight into the traditional ceremony, but instead she plunges into a speech. "On this day, six moons ago, the impossible happened. After generations of living here in peace, almost everything we care about was wiped away by a flood. It was only by perseverance and determination that we got back on our paws.

However, this was not the only impossible thing we received. Three queens, all pregnant, gave birth all on the same night, all of them heavy in labor at the very door of death. These kits seemed like a curse at the time. How could StarClan give us such a miraculous gift, only to take it away?

Those kits, despite the odds, did not die. Almost all of them grew and thrived into what they are today, and beyond a shadow of a doubt, I can call them warriors in the truest sense of the word.

When we make cats warriors, we call out the virtues we see strongest in them. Determination. Love. Trust. Hope. Leadership.

These are only a few of the values that DragonClan has bestowed on warriors over the years on their ceremony day. I only ask that the warriors who mentor these apprentices show those qualities valiantly as they can, because these kits are our future. Now, Rushkit, Novakit, Sparrowkit, Crowkit, Sharpkit, Goldenkit, and Nettlekit, come forwards!"

All seven of us step forwards side by side, exchanging nervous glances. They're all excited to meet their new mentors. They have no idea who they'll be receiving.

Though I am just as apprehensive, I can not share their excitement. I already know quite well who will be mentoring me. "Rushkit, Novakit, Sparrowkit, Crowkit, Sharpkit, Goldenkit, and Nettlekit, you have reached the age of six moons and it is time for you to be apprenticed. Novakit, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Novapaw. Crowkit, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Crowpaw. Sharpkit, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Sharppaw. Goldenkit, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Goldenpaw. Sparrowkit, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Sparrowpaw. Rushkit, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Rushpaw. Nettlekit, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Nettlepaw."

All seven of the mentorless apprentices lie in wait. I feel my whole body tremble with the announcement of my name. I've heard this ceremony twice before, though my other ceremonies, from what I can recollect, were far more unorthodox.

"As for mentors: Novapaw, you will train with Titanfoot. Sparrowpaw, you will train with Amberstreak. Sharppaw, you will train with Scorchclaw. Goldenpaw, you will train with Hazelwhisker. Nettlepaw, you will train with Duststorm. Crowpaw, you will train with Emberstreak."

The six cats slowly make their way through the crowd to touch noses with their new apprentices. My heart begins beating a little faster. Have I not been chosen?

"Rushpaw, I will take on your training myself."

Of course. There was the answer I was expecting. I sigh with relief as our names are called by the whole clan, true enthusiasm in their voices for the first time in who knows how long. "Novapaw! Sparrowpaw! Sharppaw! Goldenpaw! Nettlepaw! Crowpaw! Rushpaw!"

My fellow apprentices begin chatting wildly with their new mentors, clearly thrilled by the prospect of training with them. Knottedstar jumps down and traditionally, presses her nose to mine, though in all honesty she's been my mentor for over a moon now. Through the writhing mass of apprentices, I keep my nose touched to Knottedstar's. She looks at me with satisfaction. "Are you ready to really begin your training?" Breathlessly, I whisper, "Yes."

It's Almost Time- Important Notice

Updates on Ashleap's Fall will resume December 1st, if nothing else gets in the way. Thank you for your patience.

OH, IT'S THE MOST

WONDERFUL TIME

OF THE YEAR.

If you think I'm talking about Christmas, well, that's two months away. I honestly have no idea why I'd be talking about Christmas in October, seeing as I am not a department store (seriously they sell Christmas lights in October now I don't even know why).

Alright, back on topic. My favorite time of the year is coming up in three days and that is the lovely month of November. As most of you who have been following me for a long time know, I am an avid fan of NaNoWriMo, which is the writing regimen (write a novel in a month, ending at around 50,000 words) that produced the original Double Rainbow and The Cities Have Fallen.

I have spent the better part of my life developing a fictional high fantasy world inhabited by a slew of mythological creatures, with the most dominant lifeforms on the planet being the doglike Canis and the foxlike Canira. The series is constantly under renovation as I edit the events, names (because obviously in ten years things get outdated, I was really young when I started this), and mythos of the world. Though honestly this is probably overhyping it (please cut me a little slack, I'm still young so obviously my worldbuilding is shaky) I am very passionate about this world and the stories I can tell with it in particular.

This year's entry builds off the other two years writings, going back

to Ancient Dreamland to the first Keepers of the Five Virtues and the very first incarnation of the Princess. I don't want to give away too much, but if you liked Natrina, get ready for a whole lot of Natrina. There will be lesbians, origin stories, time and space travel, and cider. That's a very vague description, as you can tell, so the preface I'll be writing tonight and the subsequent prologue which is either going to fall on November 1st or October 30-31 will probably give you a better idea of what you're about to read.

The book is separate from Double Rainbow and The Cities Have Fallen in that you can read this one first and not be confused (unlike TCHF). If you want to read the earlier books before reading this one (or reread if you're a dedicated fan, I'm totally going to reread for hype and so I get back into the world), feel free to go do that. After this story is finished, I'm going to recommend to any newcomers to the series that they read this first, as Double Rainbow and The Cities Have Fallen use the mythos that this book explains. As such, Double Rainbow and The Cities Have Fallen does spoil bits and pieces of this book, though a lot of things have changed as I continue working it out, so there will be inconsistencies which I hope to fix through my current rewriting of Double Rainbow (which if you haven't read, that's definitely a good way to see if you like what I'm going to be working on). Honestly I could just rewrite the prologue of TCHF and be fine because nothing else from that book has much to do with this one.

If you are reading this, I am setting up the new book *as we speak*. There will be an author's note that will later be replaced by a prologue up as well as a nice preface. The title, currently " The Gardenkeeper's Daughters", is a temporary name as the original title is already copyrighted. The cover is also under production by the lovely and talented . Though I know a lot of you are more fanfiction oriented, or have no interest in plunging into a world with a name like "Dreamland" (in which case I totally agree and I'll change it as soon as I find a replacement, in the mean time, I did come up with it years and years and years ago), I would really appreciate it if you supported me on my third endeavor into the world of original novel writing.

Thank you to all my supporters!

-Aislyn (sometimes) Swift

Unloved

Jetkit has taken to following me around. He alone seems undisturbed by the rumors about me. In fact, he seems to be creepily excited with the morbid prospect of my past.

"So, what did Jade look like?" he asks.

"Kind of like you, but her fur was nowhere near as glossy or beautiful." I say, remembering the scrappy kit. My mind immediately turns to her unmoving body and I look down at the ground, focusing intently on the rocks.

"Are you sure she wasn't twice my size with razor claws?" he inquires, pressing closer to me with large wide eyes that have never closed once since he opened them.

"No!" I say. "Just a kit, alright? Stop asking!" The words come out far harsher than I had meant, and the confused kit recoils from my side.

"Rushpaw, you don't have to be mean about it! Plus, she had to be a monster! Otherwise, you wouldn't have killed her..." He notices my silence, and his expression suddenly very solemn, he whispers, "Would you?"

"Sh-shut up!" I yell. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

"I only said you didn't have to be mean about it!" he complains.

I blink. Am I imagining things? Annoyed and aggravated, I stride away towards a large group of apprentices, who are gossiping idly and sharing tongues, a common tradition this early in the morning. I suppose none of them got asked to go on the dawn patrol.

"What's going on?" I ask, tail twitching.

"We were just talking. It's not a big deal or anything." Sharppaw says, looking away from me.

"It's nice to see you, Rushpaw. You've been so quiet lately." Sparrowpaw says.
"Is it really?" Nettlepaw questions.

Drawing the conversation away from the accusation, I say, "So, what brings you all together?"

"Now that we're apprentices, we rarely ever have time to sit around and share tongues. We take the opportunity when we can get it." Nettlepaw says with a grunt of general disdain.

"That's a good thing, Nettlepaw! We don't need to dawdle when we could be helping the clan!" Goldenpaw says, cuffing her brother over the ear affectionately.

"You know what else you must never have time for?" Novapaw teases, "A bath. Your fur is disgusting!"

"I figured you'd be trying to groom me, so I rolled through nettles deliberately." Nettlepaw replies snidely.

Novapaw, sticking his tongue out, begins trying to clean it. It's so different from his usual assertive attitude, but the others seem to be laughing along with him.

"You're all so different now. I wish I had more time to catch up with you." I say bitterly.

"Why does Knottedstar keep you away from the rest of us, anyways?" Sparrowpaw questions.

"She's special." Nettlepaw hisses. "It's an honor for her to be here. Isn't that right?"

"She doesn't keep me away from anything. I'm just very busy." I say quietly.

In the distance, Knottedstar watches me with piercing brown eyes, her tail flicking like an angry viper. Though I know she's not angry,

only reflective, something about her dark eyes still fills me with guilt for goofing off. Just her presence makes me feel like I should be busy helping the clan.

Perhaps that's what a leader is. Someone inspiring, even a little on the terrifying side. Someone who can keep her warriors busy. Regardless, I know I should be with her, so I say a hasty farewell and trod over to her.

"Very nice to see you." Knottedstar says, "I was beginning to think you were too busy for me."

"Me? Never." I say playfully. "So, what am I going to learn today?"

Knottedstar purrs in response. "You'll see when we get there."

I glance back at the apprentices, who have already resumed their tight circle. As we leave camp by way of the river, we pass the elder's den. Owlflight is sitting out in the sun, shaking ever so slightly, and Emeraldlight is by her side, holding her up. "Owlflight isn't feeling well." I note. "Do you think she'll be okay?"

"Owlflight is very strong, both internally and externally. I remember when she was a young warrior in her prime." Knottedstar purrs, wading into the stream and quickly crossing it. It's large enough to deter kits, but now that I'm an apprentice, I can touch the bottom, even in the middle.

"You were around back then?" I ask as I slowly push my way through the gentle waters, realizing how rude I sound far too late to take it back.

"I was only a kit." explains Knottedstar. "I may look old, but I'm actually not much older than most of the warriors. The bulk of the clan is aging quickly."

"Not as long as we're around." I insist. "There are so many apprentices now. Surely they'll be able to support the clan."

"It's not 'they', it's a 'we'." She tells me without so much as turning to look at me. We're in the ambiguous territory between WindClan and DragonClan. Since WindClan cats are moor hunters, they don't

come here, but since DragonClan territory is so large, we never come here either.

Suddenly, Knottedstar stops, her tail slicing a wide arc before coming to rest as she turns to me. "I thought we'd do a little battle training in a slightly less orthodox location. We'll go over what you learned earlier." she dictates.

"Any particular attacks?" I ask.

"No. I'd like to see everything that you've learned." Knottedstar says. "You'll be up against many demons, both those within and those without. They won't be sparing you any mercy. They will not go easy on you because you are young."

"So you won't either?" I finish for her, bracing myself for an attack at any moment.

"Of course I will. I'm not trying to kill you, I'm trying to train you. In fact, as a show of my kindness, why don't you take the first attack?"

I slowly creep forwards and then lunge like a diving hawk at her underside. It's an awkward slice and she sidesteps, sending me sliding into the soil. She places a paw on my back, and though I try to get up, I find she has me pinned extremely well. Seeking a solution, I jerk sideways to roll under her, and her paw gives way. I'm now positioned to attack her underbelly, but she pins me down again. Frustrated, I unsheathe my back paws and hit her in the stomach as hard as possible. She gasps, pulling away.

"Knottedstar! I'm so sorry!" I say, aware that her underbelly is bleeding.

"Demons within. Remember, this is only a training fight." Knottedstar places a determined paw forwards. "Try again. This time, you're in charge."

My heart still pounding with fear, I take another uneasy strike, but she slashes me away with ease.

Our strokes are fluid as we go back and forth, both of us circling as

neither advances, only striking occasionally and retreating. Without any warning, Knottedstar rushes at me and strikes me back, sending me stumbling to the ground.

As I get up, she stands over me, waiting for me to get up. "Now-"
With a swift strike, Knottedstar sends me reeling backwards. With another slash, I find my back hit a tree. I'm cornered. "Why did you kill her?"
I stop, caught off guard. I know perfectly well who 'she' is. "I was protecting the clan from a dangerous rogue who was intent on killing everyone in the nursery,' I say wryly, trying to keep my beating heart from racing ahead of me and sending me out of control.

She looks away. "If only that was the whole truth."

Rage overwhelms me and my claws scour a hit across her face. Knottedstar backs up, her calm expression barely moved by this revelation.

"You need to leave, Lunarshine."

I bare my teeth, the other presence within me suddenly unleashed in full, brutal agony. "I didn't ask for this!"

Her face isn't bleeding. I realize the wound wasn't nearly deep enough to get the point in. My muscles tensing, I aim for her face again and spring, but she steps aside. This time, I land cleanly, strength rushing through me. Turning around, I jump forwards and miss again.

"Fight back, for StarClan's sake." I yell, though I'm hardly in control anymore. Something else has taken over, pushing me downwards to the point that I can barely see what's going on. My mind feels fuzzy, as if I've just woken up, and the haziness is spreading rapidly.

Knottedstar sits down. "The battle is over. I would appreciate talking to Rushpaw now."

I take a step forwards. My paws are no longer my own. "She's right here."

"Is she?"

"Yes. She's both of us." I tell her, everything finally in place. Yes. I am not one but two, two souls in one body, sharing one conscience.

"Both of you?"

I realize she's stalling me, but I no longer feel angry. Instead, I feel relief. Knottedstar's dark eyes bring me back to reality and I gasp as I sink back into myself again, like coming up from the depths of the deepest lake imaginable.

"That was amazing!" I say. "You took on the cat who keeps possessing me.... Lunarshine!"

"Yes, I did. She's not quite as sinister as she'd like us both to believe. However, she does have some... strong opinions about various things. One of those is the clan's safety."

"Is that why she's back?"

"Very good. I believe she and Ashleap managed to reincarnate themselves into one body in order to return and help save the clan from some sinister threat." Knottedstar tells me.

"What?" I ask.

"The very way we live right now is unsustainable. The creations of the tunnels are growing in power. It is fitting that the cat who originally spilled this power into the tunnels and the cat who first tamed them would work together to end the sinister threats within them, isn't it?"

"That's me?"

"That's you."

I can feel their hearts within mine, their souls turning. They recognize their names, even when dormant. It's a history that they gave up to become me.

Not just a history. Two lives. Once you leave StarClan... you can't

return.

I blink. "Is that all, Knottedstar?"

"There will be greater hardships tomorrow." Knottedstar tells me, licking herself.

"What will we be doing then?" I ask apprehensively.

"We'll be training with the other apprentices. I'd imagine that's far more terrifying than ghouls or spirits of any kind." she teases. "For now, we should return to camp."

She leads me back to the empty camp, and then walks off in the opposite direction towards the elder's den. Owlflight is hacking so loudly that I can hear it from over here. Perhaps her situation is more sinister than Knottedstar would have me believe.

My thoughts are disrupted by a conversation just past the bushes.

"Oh, come on." says a familiar voice, full of extroverted guile.

"No!" snaps a young, whiny she-cat I know to be Sharppaw.

"Sharppaw, please! We could be good friends." I listen as once again Novapaw's voice fills the clearing.

Curious and slightly disturbed, I slide into the bushes with narrowed eyes and listen to the conversation.

"Did you hear that?" asks Sharppaw, trying to back away from him.

"Not important."

Oh, but it is...

"The point is... Rushpaw is a little unstable and quick to violence. I'm beginning to think I might have misjudged her... and if I ever do become leader, you might be my deputy."

My heart stops at his last five heart-rending words. I long to run to him desperately, to ask him if it was really all true, for him to

reassure me, but something holds me rooted to the ground, firm as paws slammed down atop my own.

No! You don't have to go running back to him. We'll get our revenge later.

I look longingly after him as he says, "The truth is, I'm scared of her." For a split second, his eyes are wide with genuine fear. With that, his terrified gaze returns to his usual, charismatic expression to match his confident stride and he dips back into camp.
"I am too. There's only so long Knottedstar can cover for her." Sharppaw whispers after him. She turns around to face me for a second, her eyes narrowed to slits, before she turns away. Did she see me?

My whole body shakes violently as I stumble out of the bushes once they're gone. Still, the angry spirit churns and roars within me. She is the one who forced my paw last time.

They don't deserve your friendship! Bring them all to your paws! You know what you're capable of! Knottedstar is even nurturing it for you!

Watching the other apprentices in camp gaze kindly as I come their way, not knowing I scent their fear, not knowing I've begun to feel afraid of myself.

(and we're back! It's been quite a while. What characters do you want to see more of? Enjoying some mythos? What do you think Lunarshine and Ashleap's true motivations may have been, and what are Knottedstar's 'sources'? Discuss below!)

Unforgiven

"All the apprentices save for Sunpaw will be training with Rubyshine, Hazelwhisker and Scorchclaw." Knottedstar calls from the Highfall. True to tradition, she must yowl over the rush of the nearby waterfall. Though it isn't loud enough to drown out our own voices, it's considered a metaphorical way of being stronger than nature. Once, I wished to yell over it, but now that I'm older, I can't think of anything more terrible than being up in the spotlight with cats who hate me on all sides. The entire clan is very hostile and strange to me now. "Amberstreak has been temporarily training two apprentices due to some... unfortunate circumstances. Hopefully, if Sunpaw performs well, she'll take her place as a warrior of DragonClan tonight."

The clan purrs appreciatively, several warriors bending down to offer encouragement to the bashful apprentice. She briskly makes her way through the curious crowd to Amberstreak, who nods to her, and the two leave. The rest of the clan departs and the cluster of apprentices turns to me, their eyes wide. Clearly, they didn't expect the announcement either. I flinch at their harsh gazes, then realize they aren't glaring at me. They all look pleased to see me. Hastily, I pad over.

"Hey, Rushpaw!" purrs Sparrowpaw, his tawny fur bright in the early morning sunlight.
"H-hello!" I stutter, shocked to see them all.

"It's so nice to see my sister again! Remember me? I'm your brother." Sparrowpaw teases, nuzzling me.
"I'm the one who cut your ear." adds Thistlepaw.
"I'm the one who gave you that mark on your head. Remember when we were entering the DarkClan bush and I pushed a branch away and then it hit you in the face?"
"Like I could forget." says Thistlepaw bitterly.

Crowpaw purrs. "We were such silly kits, weren't we?"

I look around to see all the apprentices far merrier than they were the other day. Perhaps it's just that they haven't worked out yet. Perhaps they're just in good moods.

Unfortunately, not all of them share the warm and welcoming joy. Sharppaw gives me a disdainful look, clearly uninterested by my presence, and Novapaw looks away. My heart beats rapidly, pining for his approval, but I hold myself down.

"We should go. Our "mentors" won't be happy if we spend all day dithering around, even if it is nice to catch up with Rushpaw after..."

"Three moons." I tell her.

"Three moons? Feels like a lifetime!" Sparrowpaw says, shocked.

"Don't I know it!" Sharppaw says.

"For StarClan's sake, let's go already!" Goldenpaw begins nudging us along like an old queen. She reminds me faintly of Scarletsky.

So many cats I rarely see anymore... have I really been so busy with training?

Rubyshine, Hazelwhisker, and Scorchclaw are in no hurry when we get to them. They sit in their own cluster, talking idly in hushed voices. I make out a few names, but nothing else of interest.

Slamming both of her companions, Rubyshine turns to us with unprecedented and probably fake enthusiasm. "Hey, kits!" Rubyshine says cheerfully.

"Rubyshine? You're not a mentor." Goldenpaw notes.

"Knottedstar said all three of us could train you. Can't break up the group!" Rubyshine purrs. She sounds like a giddy apprentice herself. Hopefully Knottedstar had come great reason for making Hazelwhisker (who's not much better) a mentor so young, though she undoubtedly had to. Who am I to question her authority?

Together, we begin walking out of camp at a leisurely pace. Luckily

for us, most of the other warriors are out and don't see the disgracefully unproductive group of warriors striding their way into the forest in no hurry at all.

"Isn't Titanfoot part of your 'group' too?" asks Thistlepaw as we leave camp

"Titanfoot has been acting really odd lately." mews Hazelwhisker reflectively.

"You apprentices don't need to hear any of this. It's just gossip." Scorchclaw gazes coolly at the other two cats, both of whom shudder under his gaze.

"Yeah! Just gossip. Though, from what I've heard... I'd watch your back, Rushpaw." Rubyshine's eyes narrow.

"We're clanmates. Clanmates would never hurt each other." I lie quite loudly, the rest of the forest echoing back my words.

"Hear, hear." Sharppaw says sarcastically, casting a glance at Novapaw.

Novapaw hisses quietly through his teeth.

"We're here!" announces Rubyshine. I look around but see nothing but forest.

"We're where exactly?" asks Novapaw, echoing my sentiments.

"We'll be hunting." Scorchclaw says. "So, why don't you get to it? We'll be assessing your progress as we go."

"Can we work in pairs?" asks Sparrowpaw.

"I don't see why not." Rubyshine says.

Sparrowpaw bumps me. His eyes are bright and cheerful as he leads me into the forest. I watch Novapaw and Crowpaw as well as Sharppaw and Goldenpaw go their own way, leaving Thistlepaw to hunt with the mentors. We part ways quickly, eager to make up for the missed time and well aware that the "fun" part of the activity is

over.

Sparrowpaw sniffs the air, his tail flicking wildly as he does so. Eventually, he settles on one scent and paces after it. Determined to keep up, I follow him, practicing every technique Knottedstar has taught me for stealth. He looks back, admiring my silence, and then rushes forwards at a nearby finch. It takes flight but he slams it down, killing it quickly. He turns to me with a sad sigh.

"I hate killing birds."

"Why?" I ask.

"I was named after one!" he tells me. "It's basically fratricide."

"What?" I ask, confused. He sounds like Knottedstar with his fancy words and deep gaze.
"Never mind. Anyways... birds are the only other animals with an ear for song."

"So it wasn't just a clever kit trick, was it?" I taunt.

"No, I still hear the soul songs all the time. I was just a little scared, that's all. We're only apprentices, Rushpaw." He buries his thrush. "We don't need to take on the whole world yet, much yet the destiny of our clan and everything in it- and below it."

"Speak for yourself." I say.

He sniffs the air again, but this time I catch my own scent. We bound in opposite directions and I give chase as a frightened squirrel notices my presence. As it dashes away, I catch it halfway up the tree. It's not a very clean kill, but it still smells delicious. Heading back to where Sparrowpaw met me last, I see he's not there. Possibly taking a little longer on his kill?

My nose twitches. There's something here.

Sharppaw and Goldenpaw shamble into the clearing. Goldenpaw is cut up in several places and Sharppaw is dragging her paw behind her.

"What happened?" I ask, but a loud yip greets my ears and my fur goes straight up in terror as a long and lanky creature with large teeth and beady eyes enters the clearing, fixed on us as it begins pacing. Goldenpaw and Sharppaw form a defensive circle with all of our backs to one point, but we still have no idea where it will strike. "That's a fox."

"Not just one fox..." The last two apprentices and the mentors appear on the edge of the clearing, seeing us surrounded by the two flanking foxes.

The fox leaps at me and I duck under. Its fangs barely miss my side and it turns, running at me again. Sharppaw yelps with pain as a fox picks her up and I bite its leg from my convenient position on the ground. It drops her with a yelp and is set upon by the other three warriors.

Though the foxes are large and crafty, they're clearly outnumbered, and they take the first opportunity to flee, bleeding from several points.

"That's right! Get out of here!" calls Scorchclaw.

"Scorchclaw, stop it!" scolds Goldenpaw.

"Well, we've scared off most of the prey in the area and I don't feel safe with partners anymore. What do you all say we get your current prey, get Goldenpaw and Sharppaw to the medicine den, and do this again tomorrow? I'm sure a more experienced evening patrol can hunt while others make sure the foxes are really gone."

"Fine with me." Thistlepaw mutters.
"I got the most prey anyways." Sharppaw adds.

Seeing this as a unified consensus, the mentors drag us back to camp. Pulling me aside from the group with a large bump on the side, Sharppaw hisses in my ear, "I don't like him either, alright? Both of you are weird and creepy and your kit clan was really harebrained. Thanks for saving my life... now please get out of it."

I find we've stopped and she walks away, tail high and head higher.

I stare after her, confused, and Novapaw approaches me with his signature grace.
"Well, now that she's gone, I believe we have a lot to talk about."
His tone is the one he uses with those he's about to manipulate.

"Novapaw!" I say. "Were you listening to all of that?"

"It's really awful when cats listen in on your conversations, isn't it?" He says with a hint of anger below his cool tone.

"I can't believe you said that about all me." I whisper, trying to get rid of the pounding hurt in my throat. "I know you have a lot of friends, but I don't. I just have you and now..."
"You're alone?"

"No." I say. "I'm never really alone." The two spirits stir within me, bubbling to come out, but I keep them down. After all, they might seem like separate entities, but I'm really just a culmination of both. Staying in control means balance, and knowing both of them, it's the only way I want to go.

"I am." Novapaw says.

"You don't have to be. Are you really scared of me?" I ask.

"Yes." Novapaw admits. "Yes, I am."

I flick my ears, veiling my disappointment. "That's fine. I'm not so sure I can trust myself either. For now, I suppose it's best we both have some time alone."
His eyes slit but the rest of his face is still emotionless and cold as stone. "You've already been doing that."

"I suppose I have. As for being your deputy... I fully intend on becoming leader far before you." Though it's a lie, it carries a certain satisfaction. With a lash of my tail, I walk away into the cool spring air to join the other apprentices.

Revenge

"Are you sure you don't want to do special training again?" I ask Knottedstar, my eyes wide. I feel my heart pulse with an emotion that's not new to me- guilt. Did I do something wrong? Why doesn't she want to train with me these days?

"I've been very busy with leader duties. The warriors are restless," she tells me, "Tensions are running high in camp. As much as I'd love to train with you, we both know the clan has to come first- no matter what."

"That's reasonable." I say with a curt nod. "What do you need me to do, then?"

"I believe that's Amberstreak's job, not mine. She's already sent out patrols but I'm sure you could get on a late one if you tried."

I nod, bounding over to Amberstreak. The warm newleaf air is fresh on my pelt, making it ruffle like the winds above. I take in a deep breath, trying to soak in the scent, and exhale with a long and satisfied purr as I approach the bright she-cat, who's talking with a group of three cats.

"May I join a patrol? I missed the official ones and-" I say, but she waves me away with her tail.

"You're fine. Carbonfrost, Emberstreak, and Sunshade are all about to go on a border patrol. You can join them."

I recognize my father among the three and dip my head respectfully. Though I don't know him well, Scarletsky always told me he was amongst the clan's greatest warriors.

"We should head out." he says, leading the other two she-cats and I out of camp with determined purpose. We march in rhythm as he

guides us through the forest, sniffing the air and making small talk with Emberstreak.

"Sorry I was so late. I was helping with the kits and they were acting up. You know, those kits are malicious. It's almost like they have some sort of secret agenda to make the lives of our warriors miserable." Sunshade says.

"They're just kits. We were all late today." Carbonfrost tells her. "No need to apologize."

My ears twitch, hearing a rustling in the bushes. Smelling nothing but old prey-scent, I decide this is something better left for the hunting patrols.

"What border are we going to patrol?" I ask Carbonfrost, but Sunshade answers me instead.

"LionClan, I believe. They don't check theirs often. For such a big clan, you'd think they'd be more vigilant, but no one wants to fight them anyways." Sunshade informs me with her face wrinkled in disgust.

"Are they really that stupid?" I ask, surprised.

"Reckless." Carbonfrost corrects me. "Close, though." he adds teasingly.

"Reckless or not, they should really-"

Carbonfrost stops. "Do you smell that?"

"Smell what?" I ask.

He leads us in a skewed curve, deviating from our path towards LionClan, and I notice there are bloody pawmarks on the ground. My nose wrinkles up and my stomach turns uncomfortably as the pawmarks are coated by messy splashes. The tang is strong, though beneath it I can almost scent something else, something far more sinister...

We approach a nook in the forest between a tree and a bush, where

a large figure is hunched over a bright and all too familiar form.

Carbonfrost rushes over and slashes the cat standing over my mother's corpse across the face. Titanfoot, now bleeding from fresh scars across the face, stares angrily up at my father. "You foxhearted rogue." he growls, noticing the blood on her claws.

"Scarletsky!" I cry. I can barely run on my shaking legs as I stumble across the clearing to her body, pressing my face into her bloody sides. Her eyes are wide open in shock and fear and savage bites line her neck, some of them still slowly oozing blood. My ears begin to ring painfully as Carbonfrost and Titanfoot hiss at each other, circling, while Sunshade stands in abject horror and Emberstreak has her claws unsheathed, ready to pounce.

The ringing grows more powerful, a high sound like a shrill bird call as it echoes in my skull and Carbonfrost yells for Sunshade to run back to camp for help. It rings through my brain, whispering and screaming at the same time in an awful cacophony and unable to hold back the torrent of emotion flooding through me, I let it all go. I can feel something wrap around me, something foul, heavy, and decaying yet light as air when I try to move. It surrounds me like an aura and something besides my own voice rings from my mouth when I speak.

"My poor mother."

The rage spills from me like a waterfall cascading onto the ground, a never ending torrent of hatred released as I nudge her body. She's still warm.

I turn to the fighting cats and Carbonfrost looks away, staring at me with as much fear as when he saw his mate's body. I step forwards, each pawstep burning in the best way as I approach them both. My claws stay sheathed as I walk up to Titanfoot. "You're still angry." I say, my voice not my own but that of another cat, one much older and wiser. Ashleap has broken through and though I no longer control my own pawsteps, I do not feel scared or angry. I feel save.

"You killed her! I just got revenge. How does it feel to lose someone you love? Someone innocent?" Titanfoot puts a foot backwards, but

her back is arched and her ears flat.

"Not everything is what it seems in this world. I wish I could find some way to show you, but I can not. I only wish you understood the life of an innocent cat is far more valuable than-"

Claws sink into my side as Titanfoot, unfazed by my ghostly aura, slices down the side of my neck, close to where she used the killing bite on my mother.

"Get away or I'll do it again. I'll kill you." Titanfoot warns. The others are recovering from their shock

"Petty revenge." I finish, blood still dripping down my side. My claws unsheathe and I hear Ashleap yell, "Don't do it!" but she's me and so is Lunarshine as she grapples for control. We stagger towards Titanfoot, and our claws flash in midair as we parry back and forth, though I'm now losing blood. Even in this elevated state, I can tell the wound was deep and I can feel my lifeblood leaking away.

"She's dangerous! That's not a living cat, it's a dangerous animal capable of killing us! She already killed Jade. Aren't you guys going to help me?" Titanfoot asks as a powerful blow sends her down. Carbonfrost rounds on Titanfoot, claws unsheathed. "The only dangerous animal here is you, Titanfoot."

He and Emberstreak dive from both sides, perfectly synchronized in rage. I myself try to get a few blows in, Lunarshine urging me on, but her influence is fading and I can feel Ashleap escaping from the pent-up corner of my mind. My brain is buzzing like a beehive again.

"I'm back with reinforcement- Holy StarClan, what is that?!" Sunshade mews incredulously. There are cats behind her but I have no idea how many.

"Ru-Ashleap!" Knottedstar says. She sounds like a kit herself, full of awe. "What happened?"

I open my mouth but nothing comes out. I can see light all around me and I have a feeling the blood on the ground still belongs to

Rushpaw, even if I am a separate...

Separate...

Jetkit is by her side.

I look at him closely and see his form flickers to that of Novapaw's. I blink again and see it keeps changing, moving to cats that I do not know but somewhere within me I can recognize from ages long gone.

Titanfoot's eyes widen as she backs up into nothing, eyes narrowed. "You can't scare me. You can't scare me."

The lights begin closing in from all sides, sapping my strength. My paws go weak beneath me as the ghostly aura blinds my eyes and the light grows ever more powerful. Silhouettes of cats begin to appear on all sides of me and I open my mouth to find it unfamiliar yet certainly mine.

"Where am I?" I ask, and the smell of herbs waft up my nose. It's a medicine den, but looking out at the rest of DragonClan, I realize that it's not our camp at all... and I'm not the patient.

Memory

My head pounding painfully, I get up slowly, stepping carefully over a bright red tom with a disfigured back leg who snarls in his sleep as I pass him into the clearing. It's cold, especially for what I can only assume is either greenleaf or newleaf, judging by the huge stock of prey on the pile and the short cut coats of the cats around me.

Where have I landed? Am I in DragonClan at all anymore?

New and curious faces stare at me from every angle, yet they somehow smell so much like home. I recognize very subtle things about their faces immediately: the slant of a nose, the curl of a smile, the distinct scent, all of it screams DragonClan.

Perhaps it's not a where at all.

Perhaps... it's a when.

My fur is much longer than it was before, my shoulders slimmer, my tail longer and my entire body larger, perhaps with age. The cats nods to me respectfully as I make my way through their ranks. They seem understanding when I stare at them, confused.

"Can you see them again?" asks a dark gray she-cat. "You look terrified."

However these cats know me, they know me as someone to be respected but looked on from a distance. Even the kits seem to shy away, excepting one, who bounds up to me with glittering eyes. "Are you seeing the spirits again, Ashleap? What do I look like?"

Ashleap.

The piercing alarm at the back of my mind grows still. There's a recess, a void that I didn't know could exist and I feel like I've been

dropped into a bottomless lake.

For the first time in my life, I'm completely alone in my own mind. "Probably an ugly toad!" spits her littermate from a distance.

"I'm fine." I tell them both.

Ashleap, Ashleap, what did I remember about her...?

She was a medicine cat in DragonClan a long time ago.

Perhaps it was before we moved camps. That would explain the Highfall's disappearance, the lessening of deciduous trees. DragonClan used to live closer to the mountains before one of the more recent leaders moved us away following a great catastrophe.

Alright. I can do this.

My mind still burns with the sudden emptiness. There are no voices, no whispers, but also an unexplainable *emptiness* that has no words or meaning to it.

Another red cat, similar to the one in my den in coloring but vastly different in build and bulk, nods to me as he passes by, off for a patrol, no doubt.

A gray she cat approaches me, her gaze penetrating and slightly terrifying. She must be the leader. "Well, Ashleap, what did you plan on doing today?"
I look about the camp and quickly decide, "I'll be gathering herbs."

"Will you be bringing your apprentice? He looks awfully lonely in the medicine den." The gray she-cat says, nodding towards my den.

I look after her gaze, but all I can see is the red tom with the disfigured leg, now fully alert. I had thought he was a patient. Thank StarClan he was asleep when I first stepped over him.

I want to shake my head, but it might be easier to get information out of him then the group of cats I'll inevitably have to face if I ask the right questions. "I will." I say. "It'll be good exercise for him."

"He needs it. Angry furball does nothing but sit in camp and complain when he's not around you."

I purr. "Better air him out, then." Concealing my inner confusion, I stalk over to my 'apprentice', who is lazily sprawled across the entrance with seemingly not a care in the world.

"We're going to go herb collecting today." I tell him briskly. "Are we low on anything?"

"That's your job." he tells me. Immediately, I feel my fur spike. Why would Ashleap, who was from what I've heard a very competent medicine cat, choose such a rude and apathetic cat as her apprentice?

"You should be taking inventory too." I insist.

"If you really must know, we're missing cobwebs and catmint. I also saw some reeds down by the river." He gets up slowly, a strange dance that involves him trying to maneuver around his broken leg. "Could be useful." he says nonchalantly.

"Could be?!" *Why me, why me, why me?*

"You're the prodigy, not me." he says. "I don't know anyone else who could teach themselves every herb in the forest in three moons. It's unfortunate you didn't have a mentor after Rainfall's death, but on the bright side, now we're stuck together."

How great is that?

It occurs to me now that I am not Ashleap, I am not a prodigy, and I have no idea what any herbs do outside of poppy seeds. Not only that, but Ashleap in my head has gone silent, leaving me to figure out her life alone. Is this some sort of messed up dream punishment for killing Jade? Did Titanfoot kill me? Am I not going to StarClan?

I force all these questions down as the red tom and I leave camp, side by side. He presses far too close to me to be comfortable, a gesture further complicated by my medicine cat status. Surely Ashleap wouldn't be having secret affairs... would she?

I brush him off, and he says nothing. He looks at me with a radiant concern so unlike the hostile and blunt cat I just met. Whatever he may act like, he probably cares for me... I mean Ashleap... a lot.

What type of affection is that?

As we stalk through the northern forests of DragonClan's territory, which I've hardly explored at all, the other bright red cat slams through the bushes and nearly knocks us both over. A rabbit scampers past my paws and I watch it go, still shocked by the sudden newcomer.

"Fancy meeting you here, my golden sun and... Infernotail." he says, coming far closer to me than I'd ever want from someone I hardly know. He's eerily familiar, far more than the other cats. There's a brash confidence about him that makes him irresistibly charismatic, complemented by ruffled and slightly scarred fur as well as powerful bulk.

"You've always been one for entrances, Pyrewing." Infernotail says.

"I'm just hunting. You two happened to get in the way." he meows, looking past us to where the rabbit disappeared. "Don't tell Cloudfrost and Tidalfall I've been goofing off. They'll skin me alive." He heads back the way he came, "I'll see you later, Ashleap." He gives me a tail lash that mirrors the modern day 'follow me' signal, though I doubt he means it in the overt sense.

"You're not going to go after your prey?" I ask, looking into the undergrowth past him, but he's gone.

Now that I think about it... he looks a lot like Novapaw.

Infernotail scoffs. "I don't know what you see in him."

My eyes widen and my fur goes hot. So it's not Infernotail, but Pyrewing! "He keeps me grounded," I say, and though I have no idea if it's true or not, Infernotail seems to believe me.
"If you keep having those outbursts, you'll need him, then. Is it true you had another this morning?"

Outbursts?

"I don't think that's any of your business."

"They say you have this stare when you see them, like you're looking past us-"

"Infernotail." I say more firmly. "Herbs."

Begrudgingly,he drops the topic, but first mews, "You can talk to me. I hate your silly too-broken-to-speak-of-it charade."

I ignore him, my heart racing with the knowledge I have no idea what he's talking about. We walk in silence to the river, picking reeds and luckily enough, there just so happens to be cobweb stretched between many of them. No one has passed through here in a while. It doesn't seem like DragonClan uses the river very much at all.

It's odd. I can't imagine modern day DragonClan going for a day without long dips in it and playful teasing about fishing or pushing others in. It's more of a place of relaxation than anything else, but Infernotail regards it as if it could be dangerous.

"Is there anything else we need? We might be able to patch up your leg." I tell him, casting a glance at the clearly very expertly made cast.

"What?" he hisses. "Why would we need any more herbs for my leg? We already got the reinforcements for the cast just a few days ago."

"I'm talking about some more permanent things," I mew quietly.

"Is this some type of sadistic joke?" Infernotail hisses. "You know I'm not getting better. Otherwise, I wouldn't be stuck with this stupid job in the first place! Do you think I want to be stuck doing medicine work with a freak?"
My ears flatten. Somehow, despite hardly knowing him, the accusation burns. Is he really unhappy with his job? Did Ashleap know this? What would she do? What would she say?

All of those thoughts are entirely too selfless. I step forwards. "You think... I'm a freak?"

His eyes narrow to slits. "N-no! It slipped out. I swear I..."

I feel emotion burning away at my soul. My fur stands up on my back and my teeth open into a wide hiss, but nothing comes out. "I took you in. You broke your leg and you thought you'd never be useful again. I gave you a job and I cared for you when even your own family didn't. I listened to all your dreams you'd never achieve and I kept them in my heart because I care about you. I just want... I just want there to be some hope and if that's wrong, then fine. Anyways, you know full well that I am-" I pause. This is the same situation I'm in back home. "I am a freak."

Lucky guess, lucky guess, lucky guess, lucky guess.

All of them are evidently true.

"We're both freaks, aren't we? We're the moon and the sun in a world full of stars."

I sigh. He's not suspicious. I want to feel for him, believe in him, and I want to know more about this world I'm in despite of myself. Until I figure out how to get home, I want to know just how similar Ashleap's life was to my own. Already, there are parallels clearly drawn. Perhaps my life is just a repetition of another, already lived long ago.

If so, why come back with someone violent as Lunarshine?

Why go through any of this?

Why do I exist at all?
For now, I suppose, I'm taking it one pawstep at a time. I nod to Infernotail. "It's fine. We should get back to camp."
"You're not angry?" he mews feebly.

"I've tolerated a lot of you," I tease, "Nothing you say could get me that angry."

Oooh, it's not true.

Luckily for us both, I'm a good liar.

Keeper

I settle back into the medicine den, the soothing scent of the nearby herbs tickling my nose. Purring, I stretch out, shifting around leaves below my belly. In spite of myself, I must admit that ancient DragonClan had some really comfy nests. I begin to feel lightheaded. Am I sleepy already? It's hardly midday, though taking a nap might clear my head and help me stall out a few more hours. Any time I can spend not getting into social interaction is time well spent.

Infernoleap nudges his way in and sits down beside me. He notices how tired I am immediately, sliding in next to me with a cocky expression as he stretches out. For such a seemingly shallow and self-centered tom, he's very good at reading me.

A blinding pulse of pain makes my head burn. I feel dizzy as bright white light clouds my vision. "Ack!"

"What's wrong?" he asks. "Are you seeing them?"

I shake my head. "I can't-"

Home. There's something dark beyond the bright white, coming ever closer to me as the medicine den begins to disappear. I notice Pyrewing from a distance, his voice nothing but a buzz as it falls on my deaf ears.

I let the light wash over me and slowly, the dark figure from before becomes more catlike. The spirits thrash around in my head as I am woken awake... awake? Was I asleep? Was the entire old DragonClan nothing but a dream delusion?

The blurry figure has dark fur. Their presence is comforting. They paw me again, probably intent on waking me up. "Nova...paw?" I ask.

The figure backs away. I can feel them cringe. "No... it's just me." The voice.

It's Jetkit.

I stretch my muscles, all of which are burning like grass in a forest fire- quickly and painfully, but soon the pain gives way to a dull throbbing. Looking around, I can see scars on my sides. The battle exhausted me both mentally and physically.

"How long have I been out?" I ask desperately.

"Only a day or so, Rushpaw. It hasn't been that long." Tinyblossom meows. "Glad to have you up."
I look outside, the sunlight searing my suddenly fragile eyes, and I notice Carbonfrost. My heart drops as I remember the events that occurred before I woke up in another medicine den long ago. Ashleap seems to remember that I walked in her pawsteps, at least. I can feel the warm golden glow of her energy flood me, helping me to recover quickly, not too different from warm sunlight or the taste of honey. It's hard to describe properly.

"Oh! Oh! Now that you're up, I have some really exciting news I thought you might want to hear!" Jetkit doesn't sound all that excited, though he seems to be forcing himself to sound that way. Unfortunately, I have more pressing concerns on my mind.

"What happened to my mother?" I ask. "Is she alright?"

Tinyblossom pads towards me and licks me on the head in sympathy, or possibly to take my temperature. "She's dead. Your father isn't doing too well either. He believe he could have saved her."

"Oh." I say. Pain and grief tear at my insides like claws. Even with it's perils, Ashleap's world is feeling like an idyllic paradise in comparison to the reality I currently face.

"Um..." Jetkit nudges me. "Well, if it cheers you up, I have news. I'm going to become the new tunnelkeeper apprentice!"

I nod faintly. It doesn't help, but it at least makes him happier to

know I care. "You'll do a great job."

Another cat, flanked by three other cats obscuring her, passes by with an angry hiss. My claws unsheathe and my eyes narrow to slits. "Titanfoot..."

"Stay down!" hisses Tinyblossom, pushing me back down before I even realized my hackles were up. "She'll get her punishment. They're keeping her under heavy guard for now, but there may be exile. Knottedstar hasn't reached a decision yet."

"Why would they hesitate? We need to cast her out! She's dangerous!" I spit, and Hazelwhisker, one of the cats beside Titanfoot, turns to me with narrowed eyes.

"Oh, that's not what the hesitation is for. The question is, if we cast her out, what's to guarantee she won't find some way to pick us off? Anyone ruthless enough to kill a warrior in cold blood isn't going to just give up because we cast her out."

"Then kill her." My voice shakes. "Kill her already."

"Is that the mentality you used when you fought Jade? Not a terribly sound way to decide the fate of other cats." Tinyblossom says. My paws urge to strike out, to show her the mentality I used to fight Jade, but I hold myself back. Instead, my paws slam out sideways as I get up, hoisting myself onto my paws.

"Thanks. I'll be going now."

The wind whistles through my fur. The sky is overcast and it smells like rain. There's something rawer and far more bitter about the air here. It's something I can't quite describe.

Do you want to come back with me?

I tell myself that I'm happy here, despite the death in the air all around me. Titanfoot yells, "You can't stop me! I'll do it again! I'll kill you all! Let me at her! Let me at her!"
The others lean in on her, claws unsheathed, but the only action she makes is to turn contemptuously towards me and give me the death glare. I turn away, boiling with rage, and run immediately into

Novakit. His resemblance to Pyrewing is jarring. There are so many things I never noticed about him until I met his littermate across time. The only thing they don't share is the fur color.

"H-hello!" I say.

"Are you alright?" he asks, concerned. "You were out for a whole day. Your heartbeat was fading towards the middle."

"It was?" I muse, astounded. "Really?"
"That's nothing to sound so curious about! You could have died!"

"I know." I snap. "It was nothing but a dream and a long nap. Anyways, there's no reason for you to be so worried. I can handle myself fine."

"That's the thing. I was thinking, I know you still hate me, but... I really would like to at least be friends again, if you can give me the chance. I was terrified when I realized I might lose you. Everything fell into perspective."

I gaze into his eyes. *No,* says my head. *Yes,* says my heart. Lunarshine and Ashleap thrash within me. They've seen this before. I get the impression their love lives went very differently.

"We should go to sleep." Novapaw purrs. "I'm glad I finally came around. Losing you would've been one of the worst mistakes I've ever made."

"One of them?" I tease.

"Alright, alright! The single worst. Better?"

I nod. "Much better."

On the edge of my vision, I see Jetkit, his fur bristling. I recognize the jealousy from another life. There's something intensely familiar about those angry eyes, those raised hackles, that vivid pain.

I don't have time for it. I need to get back into my training. I need to get myself together. I'm nine moons old.

Not quite, echo the voices in my head as I lie down between Sparrowpaw and Novapaw like I did as a kit. *You're as old as the sun and the moon, a star born from the two brightest bodies of light in the sky.*

Misfits

My dreams are full of distorted images, universes not quite solid in and of themselves, all of them little more than shadows in my mind's eye. My head burns and I wake up several times in the middle of the night in pain only to fall back asleep immediately.

I wake up mid-dream to find that there's caterwauling in the warriors den that echoes deep into the night, making my eyes snap wide open.

"Wh-wha?" I sutter clumsily as I wake up, my eyes squinted tightly as I look around the apprentice den. In the clearing, I watch as a body flies through the air, landing in the dirt with a sickening thud.

Carbonfrost wrestles with Titanfoot in the cold morning air, their fur damp as they roll through puddles tinted by blood. Other warriors are coming out now, their claws unsheathed and their teeth sharp, but Knottedstar dashes in first. There's a quick struggle, much like that of prey being hunted, and as soon as Titanfoot is on top a quick wound to her neck sends blood pouring out the side.

"N-no! I'll get you! I'll get you all! Brightstar... will avenge... freaks..." Titanfoot gurgles before her head slumps sideways.

The tang of blood rests side by side with the ugly smell of muddy water on the damp night air. Knottedstar steps away from the body, paws barely dirtied, and with another roll through the water a slightly disgruntled Carbonfrost gets up with his cuts oozing a darker shade of blood.

"Who's Brightstar?" asks Thistlepaw, emerging from a den. "I heard screaming. Can't I get some sleep around here?"

"I think Titanfoot had help. A clan on the outside, perhaps. She planned a suicide mission with the knowledge another clan would avenge her death." Knottedstar hisses. "Her determination is

compelling, even if it was for all the wrong reasons. She could have been a brilliant warrior."

"She was in league with a minor clan?" echoes Snowpelt.

"BrightClan." Knottedstar confirms. "At the least, I believe that's the clan Brightstar is from. I'm decently sure he's a first generation leader."
"Who's BrightClan?" asks Amberstreak. "I've never heard *that* name."

"Who's anyone, these days?" cackles Snowpelt. "Even when I was younger, there were still dozens of clans in this area. No one cares about the small ones anyways. You kits are luckier than you know to be born into a larger, more respected clan than they are."

"We need to declare war." Carbonfrost hisses. "They could be behind the death of Scarletsky."

"I believe that Titanfoot made her own choices. Anyways, if we wanted to fight someone pitifully weak as BrightClan, we could wipe them out in less than a moon." Knottedstar says solemnly. There's a dull certainty to what she says. I imagine the much larger DragonClan crossing the forests of LionClan, all of them with the intent to kill... what? Eight cats?

"That's why we should strike now! The foxhearts deserve to pay for their crime!" hisses Carbonfrost, his fur bristling and his claws unsheathed.

"That's the perfect reason not to strike! There could be kits and queens in that clan!" cries Tinyblossom. "I understand your anger, but there's no way we could do something that heartless. DragonClan has honor!"

"The clans will be disgusted at us if we murdered an entire clan and left the young and old to die. We'll consult with the other major clans and punish them appropriately. That way, the clans at least keep the illusion they had any say in this." Knottedstar looks around at her cats.

"Are you saying we're not going to do anything?" says Sparrowpaw,

looking at the dead body with disgust. "What if they try to kill us all?"

"We're keeping her kits." Knottedstar speaks up.

"What kits?" I ask.
"Check the LionClan border. The warriors would have had to cross there. We can assume it was recent if not tonight. They might still be there." Knottedstar orders the warriors who overheard the fight.

"What?" I object, still confused.

"Well, Titanfoot's kits, obviously." Knottedstar tells us.
"She... she had *what*, exactly?" asks Carbonfrost.

"I could smell the milk on her fur. I knew that wasn't muscle but fat on her bones when she fought Carbonfrost. I believe it was obvious."

There's a sharp silence as she gazes at all of us, paying extra attention to me, as if it should have been obvious to me as well. I open my mouth to retort but say nothing.

"Sometimes you terrify me." Sunshade whispers, so quietly I assume only I can hear her until the silence is broken again.

"It's simple. One must only stay observant. It was how I became leader, you know. Now, Amberstreak, take Sunshade and Cloudfrost and go quickly as you can to the border. Speed is important. Take the kits back by any means. LionClan will understand our tresspasses." Knottedstar replies nonchalantly. The warriors stare blankly at her before a menacing glare shoos them away into the forest. Carbonfrost turns to stare point blank at Knottedstar. The eye contact with not a word to accompany it lasts for several minutes as others retire back to their dens, probably to lay awake until the sun comes up.

I stare up at the haze patchworking the sky and then back down at the ugly puddles still dark russet from the blood. I should feel happy she's gone, but the emptiness in my heart is disgusting.

"Who would mother them?" asks Carbonfrost.

"Amberstrike is due for kits soon. I believe Peacockwish could help as well." Knottedstar replies.

"The deputy?" asks Carbonfrost, curiously. "She's having kits as well?"

"I was hoping you could fill in." Knottedstar murmurs with a thoughtful glance towards the leader's den.

"Knottedstar, please." Carbonfrost says nervously, ears suddenly flat. "You know how I feel about power."

"If you insist."

None of us can fall back asleep, energy pumping through our veins from the close encounter with death. Though only Carbonfrost was in danger and it seems like someone or something tries to murder someone every other night, these midnight meetings are still far from routine.

It's morning when the patrol returns, slightly bloodied, with two scrawny figures in their mouths.

"Knottedstar." says Sunshade, gently placing a panicked kit at her paws. "We've found them." Emberstreak drops the kit's sister by her side. Both of them shiver.

"Get them warmed up. They might not survive the night otherwise." Knottedstar mews. The warriors rush off, bringing the kits to the nursery where Peacockwish's three curious children see the kits and scramble past their tired mother to gaze at the newcomers.

"Do you think they'll be alright?" I ask Thistlepaw.

"Yeah." he says, "They're gonna be fine."

***

It's half a moon later when the kits open their eyes. They're quick to do so, quicker than most, and both Flashkit and Gingerkit open their eyes at the same time. Peacockwish is taking large amounts of borage to help support them, as her own kits are long weaned.

Sparrowpaw and I come in to look at them. He has a bright curiosity in his eyes, though he looks surprisingly bitter as he stares at the parentless kits.

"Kind of like Sharppaw, huh Rushpaw?" Sparrowpaw nudges me. Unlike usual, his cheerful tone is solemn, bright words hiding darker thoughts.

"What do you mean?"
"They're orphaned. They'll never know their mother." His eyes narrow. "They have no idea how terrible she is."
I shudder, thinking of another set of orphaned kits who still remember traces of their parents. Novapaw and the others have been training with us again. How could cats so kind be related to Shadowstar or her successor, Jade?

I look at the mewling kits and feel sympathy stab my heart. I immediately expected to hate them, spawn of my nightmares and kin of my enemy, but I look at them and see fellow motherless kits who didn't ask for any of this. Quietly, I swear to protect them in the moons to come.

After all, I know plenty about being an outsider in my own camp.

Still

I wake up in the medicine den that night. The vaguely familiar scent of suntouched old herbs greets me like an old friend I know only from hazy daydreams of what used to be.
This time, I don't freak out quite as much. Instead, I stretch all the way out and slam my foot accidentally into Infernotail's head. He hardly stirs in his sleep, which causes me to curl up the corners of my mouth in amusement.

"Ashleap!" hisses a voice outside the medicine den.

It takes me a moment to realize that *that's me* and respond appropriately. "W-wha? Who? It's so late..."

"It's just after dusk. The herbs are still warm." replies the voice. "No one will care if you go now, but we need to head out before the dusk patrol gets back in."

"Wait, who is this?"
A bright red face pokes its head around the side of the den. Pyrewing is standing there with his tail straight up, only slightly curved at the end to indicate excitement. He purrs deep in his throat as I get up from my den.

"Now?" I ask, looking longingly at my den. I only just went to sleep as Rushcall and somehow the weariness has carried over.

"Now."

With a groan that's half real and half exaggerated for the sake of the argument, I follow him out of camp.

"I wish we didn't have to sneak out like this." he tells me.

"We could probably tell the clan." I say. "It would be easier.

Featherstar, at the least, would be kind to us." Surely a leader with so much charisma and power about them in a clan that accepted oddities like me would allow a relationship like this.

"The last cat you want to know is Featherstar. She's dangerous. She'll help you in times of need, sure... but if any of your problems put the clan in danger, she'd feed us to the black fox." He makes a slicing motion across his neck. "I would know. I'm deputy."

"Black fox?"

"It died moons ago. Come on, you know the story!"

I hold my tongue, though my curiosity has been piqued. The two of us come to a river, which is similar to the one back home in my time but by the looks of it, probably far further north.

"Fancy a dip?" he asks.

"It's probably freezing." I tell him. "Why would I want to-"

His tail slides forwards and I feel myself tip over the edge. "You cheeky badger!"
I pounce on him and slam him into the river, falling in myself, and we wrestle in the water playfully before falling back onto the shore. I rest my head on the rocks and purr. Something about this feels so right.

It reminds me of fantasies of Pyre- I mean Novapaw and I, when we were kits. Leader and deputy... how far away is this? Medicine cat and deputy? Dangerous as it is, we're both powerful and we're both happier than we are at home.

I gaze over at him as fireflies flicker above, illuminating his bulky body and sopping wet fur. His fur is so much darker once it's wet. In the shadows, it almost looks... black. His eyes carry the same aloofness that Novapaw's do, though there is a kindness to them Novapaw never had.

"It's like a dream." I say, looking at the fireflies. "Everything about this is so surreal."

"I wish we didn't have to wake up." I say. Do I mean it in more ways than one? I think on it for a few seconds. Even in the impossible perfection of this single second of the past, my paws itch to explore the future.

"Me too."

He even sounds like Novapaw.

If only it could be like this at home.

***

The next morning, I decide to go against Pyrewing's advice and talk to Featherstar. I approach her with attempted pride, trying to copy the charismatic air of the solemn but powerful medicine cat. "I have a moral dilemma for you, Featherstar. A theoretical what-if."

"Theoretical, you say? It's fine, you can tell me who's doing the arguing. We are friends, after all." Featherstar narrows her eyes. "Moral dilemmas in this clan need to be solved by the higher ups immediately before things get out of hand."

"The spirits whisper it to me. They seek vengeance for past sins." I say. "It's very aggravating."

"Tell them what's been done is done." she says, turning to walk away.
"Just hear me out." I almost hiss the words.

She turns back around and sits down, clearly done with me. "If you insist."

"One of the spirits, in a past life, murdered a young kit possessed by the tunnels." I start.

"What tunnels?"
"The ones under the clan!" Do they not have tunnels?!
"Ashleap, are you delirious again?"
"Different clan!" I snap.

"Ashleap!"

"Another spirit, in vengeance, killed her completely innocent mother. That cat was ordered killed. Though dead, she sought revenge from the grave, and the spirit who started the cycle of death still lives in fear. What should that cat do?"

"I've never heard that story before. Then again, I can only imagine how vast StarClan is. They've probably told you things none of us can dream of, haven't they?" She seems almost wistful about the ordeal.

"Ah- yes. I've seen many, many stories. Some of them are happier, but then again, those who died happy have no reason to ask for anything." I say, and though I'm making almost all of it up on the spot, the leader dips her head in solemn understanding. "Would you mind... telling me what you would suggest?"

"They're dead. As I said... what has been done. The dead can work it out amongst themselves."

I turn away. "I suppose that's true."

True and extremely unhelpful.

I suppose I'm dealing with this by myself.

Before I can return to my den, I see the lights on the edge of my vision and begin to panic. Not now! Not in camp! I dive into the bushes and a warrior jumps out at me, pressing down at my chest. I feel a shriek rise up in my throat but the light rips it from me as everything is taken away...

***

I wake up in my den to find that Thistlepaw has rolled over onto my chest. My eyes narrow as I shake myself from him, careful to drop him gently into my nest. It's early, and though they'll need me later, I have other plans. I walk quietly to the old rotting tree where the elders are hardly awake. Emeraldlight and Owlflight are already awake and both of them are enjoying the early sun in silence.

"We have a visitor." Even in old age, there's something calming and yet strong about Emeraldlight's voice. I can imagine how powerful

she must have looked when she was a warrior.

"So we do. What brings you here? I was beginning to think the clan had forgotten we existed." Owlflight purrs, though there's a bitterness to her mew. The log is rotting far more than I remembered and both of them are slightly disheveled.

"I want to hear a story." I tell them. "Have either of you heard of the black fox?"

Darkness

Owlflight and Emeraldlight first looked at each other as if I was mad, but I was determined to get the story, even if they wouldn't tell me. After a long moon plagued by constant teasing about it from Pyrewing and asking the better half of the clan, I eventually turn to Knottedstar herself.

"You seek dangerous stories, my apprentice." Knottedstar tells me. "No one's asked about the fox in a long time."
"So you won't tell me?" I say, disheartened.

"I never said that. Has it come up in your dreams? Ashleap and Lunarshine definitely heard about it within their lifetimes, so the memories-"

"No." I say, eager to deflect further suspicion. "I just... heard about it. Everyone's very cagey about it."

Knottedstar nods. "They have a right to be. Early DragonClan history is not full of nice cats, nor is it full of nice stories. Most of it is full of lies spread by the first leader and endless chains of revenge in murder."

I gulp. "Really?" I had heard before that our history wasn't a glorious one, but Knottedstar seems extremely cynical about it. Surely, a clan like ours couldn't be that terrible... could it?
"Come with me tomorrow and I'll tell you the story. We'll have a lot to cover."

I purr deep in my throat in spite of myself. I had expected a lot of things when I first put forth the question, but this wasn't one of them. As I prance back to the apprentices, who are about to go out hunting for the latter part of the day, Sparrowpaw notices my

enthusiasm.

"Someone's cheerful today." he tells me teasingly.

"I got some great news from Knottedstar. We're going on a special trip tomorrow!" I purr with delight.

"Someone's quite the special snowflake, huh?" jokes Crowpaw.

"Don't let it go to your head, Rushpaw." Thistlepaw warns me. "Your ego is large enough as it is."

"It is?" I ask, baffled.

"Yeah! You've always got your head in the clouds, always smiling, but you never want to talk to any of us and you're always going on about your missions. Not to be rude or anything, but you also have this tendency to scowl at cats when they interrupt your daydreaming."

"Maybe she just feels good about herself. That's not a crime, is it?" Crowpaw points out.

"What? No! That means she's in love, silly!" Goldenpaw chimes in.

"I- what?" I ask, perplexed.

"Oh! With who?" asks Crowpaw.

"Novapaw, obviously." Goldenpaw informs her sister.

"I'm right here." Novapaw says dryly, but they don't seem to notice him.

"She's always been in love with Novapaw." Thistlepaw snickers. "Nah, this is something else."

"What if she has... a NEW love interest?" Goldenpaw exclaims.

"I would never!" I say, but Novapaw is giving me a dirty look. He can't possibly believe them, can he?

"Novapaw has some competitiooooon!" cooes Goldenpaw.

"That's enough gossip." Carbonfrost snaps, emerging with the rest of the mentors, a menagerie of brightly colored and slightly peeved warriors. He's taken over Novapaw's training since Titanfoot's death, which Novapaw has been surprisingly alright with.

"You kits need to get a move on." Scorchclaw meows. "The clan needs to eat and right now, the only thing on the fresh kill pile is a dinky shrew... and you know how much I hate shrews."
"They give you indigestion, we know, we know." Hazelwhisker sighs.

"I'll make sure to catch extra shrews just for you, then. I saw some by the river the other day." jokes Novapaw, but a scowling Scorchclaw doesn't seem to appreciate his sense of humor. Then again, with Scorchclaw, Rubyshine, and Hazelwhisker, you can never really tell if they're joking or not.

Immediately, Scorchclaw turns on a leaf and says, "Of course. Catch every shrew in the forest! I'll eat them all! It's my denmates who have to worry about my indigestion, not me."

"Now you've done it." Rubyshine says, eyes narrowed teasingly.

"It's too late." Novapaw says solemnly. "All of the voles in the forest better watch out, because I'm coming."

With that, the party races into the forest, and the afternoon sun shines brightly on our coats as we search for prey, at peace for once in a blue moon.

***

"You'll be back soon?" asks Pyrewing.

"It's only nighttime. We'll discuss our plans in the morning." I tell him. Looking out at the world, I sigh. The sweet scents, the dull moonlight, his warmth, everything about it is so real. I can't believe it's only a dream.

He nods to me. "Brownkit's life depends on it."

By my side rests a small kit, his fur a vibrant copper even without

the sun to light it ablaze. Though he's not mine by birth, he's mine in spirit, and without me to care for him, I doubt he'll last long.

Leafbare is not a forgiving time in old DragonClan.

"I'll see you, then."

"You too."

Paws seize me in the darkness and before I can yowl for help, my eyes shoot open.

"You need to get up, Rushpaw! Knottedstar wants you." Sparrowpaw says, nudging me awake, and I protest with a loud groan before rolling over towards the outside of the den.

Why, oh why, did it have to be then of all moments...

He's right- the sun is already up in the sky and the others are outside the den, being their usual selves. Thistlepaw is teasing the new apprentices (Jetpaw, Maplepaw, and Cherrypaw), Goldenpaw and Crowpaw are arguing playfully over freshkill, and Sharppaw is laying in the sunlight, content.

Everyone is happy, but as usual, I find myself growing more and more alone.

Novapaw approaches me with a purr and I cling onto the small reminder of something that once was. It's a spark I carry within myself, only to burn brightest when I am safe in the back of my own mind.

The mornings aren't worth it anymore. I hate the present.

Regardless, I get up and stretch before walking to the edge of camp where the ever patient Knottedstar awaits. "Hello, Rushpaw. Are you ready?"

"Yes." I say without hesitation.

"Then we shall begin." She leaves the camp swiftly with a slash of her tail, and I follow, trying to maintain the composure I have as

Ashleap. Even though I'm not much smaller than an adult cat now, my youth feels more like a cage than anything else.

No mate. No respect. Here, I'm a freak. There, I'm a freak... but I'm a freak with power, respect, and most importantly, love.

"Is something the matter?" asks Knottedstar. "You seem... very different."

"Do I?" I ask.

"Your eyes. They're bright gold." she says, turning back to face me. "I apologize, Ashleap, but you already know this story well enough to narrate it. I'm afraid I'd prefer to talk to my apprentice."

I blink. Has anyone else noticed that?! How long have they been gold for? "I'm sorry." I tell her. "I can't control it."
"I'm sure you could." Knottedstar says coolly. "Now." She pushes through the forest, past the training grounds, past the regular hunting grounds, and still further into the deep of the forest. A chill runs down my spine as pine trees intermingle with the usual oaks and elms and my paws ache from the climb upwards.

Slowly, the oaks and elms disappear, as do the pines. We emerge at the top of a great hill.

I gasp as I look at the most beautiful landscape in the entire world. The dull sun casts diluted beams of light from around clouds, and a fresh breeze blows my fur and below us, a field of wildflowers in an assortment of colors greets my eyes. Beyond it lies more elevated land, which ends in the distance at a sharp point. As for what lies below that, I have no idea- it seems to drop off to nowhere.

I breathe in the smell of old DragonClan only to find that the cat-smells are long gone.

Knottedstar paces towards the plateau and I follow. Pine trees close in around us again and I brush past them carefully. Looking around, I find Knottedstar gone from sight.

"Knottedstar? Are you there?"

I race through the trees to find her at the edge of the cliff. Below her lies nothing but more trees, though there's something sinister about the ledge.

"Do you know why this ledge is important?" she asks.

I shake my head. "I've never been up here."

"DragonClan warriors rarely go this high up. No one wants the territory here."

"Why? It's so beautiful!"

She looks down over the edge. "Let me tell you a story, Rushpaw-

Once, long ago, there was an apprentice much like you, with the potential for much good or terrible evil. She lived in a clan whose name is long lost to time, a clan who lived far to the west in territory no one knows any longer. That land was plagued by a terrible fox with fur the pitch black of shadows.

As for how the fox came to be that color, it was once claimed that its fur had been burned in an ancient fire and had grown back in black as the soot that followed. Others claim it was dark because there was no light in its soul. Some will tell you that it was made from shadows. As for me? I have no reason to believe the fox was ever anything but an excuse, a manifestation of the fear and hatred within the cats who lived there.

Regardless, every moon, this fox would come and devour one cat. Usually, the weak were set out, as otherwise the clan would die. This slowly deprived the clan of any heroism or conscience it might have once had. Our protagonist, Stormpaw, begins her story as her friend, Twistpaw, was set out to die one night.

Now, Stormpaw was not one to take destiny lying down. She told her friend to come away with her, but Twistpaw refused, as otherwise the youngest kits in the clan were in danger of dying. They fought until the fox... emerged and tore out Twistpaw's heart before Stormpaw's eyes.

If we are to assume the fox wasn't real... then who killed

Twistpaw?"

"Why would we?" I ask. "Stranger things have happened here."

Knottedstar sighs. "Yes, I suppose so. I've always believed that the darkness within us is darkness enough, but looking at you... I can't be sure of anything.

Either way, Stormpaw returned to the clan bloody and angrily announced she was leaving. She ran away and found herself in the depths of the woods, starving to death. Allegedly, that night, she came upon two beasts of legend, a dragon and a phoenix, though all we know now is that one of them is lizardlike with bat wings and the other, a great red bird. The rest has been lost to the ages. Hallucinations or truth? You decide, but it doesn't change the end result- Stormpaw emerged Dragonstar, and began to grow her clan.

She warned them constantly of the black fox in the woods, and her clan grew dependant on her, terrified of the outer world. She gave them names to remind her of home- why, her medicine cat was even named Twistheart, though this Twistheart was slightly less... interested in her affections.

She turned her love elsewhere and fell madly enamored with a cat named Stormheart, who even bore her old prefix. She spent many moons trying to seduce him, only to find he had already taken a mate when she one day saw his own kit about his paws.

Angrily, she turned on his mate, Flametail, and began to spread slander, which the innocent clan was terrified to hear.

Flametail, now an outcast, was driven to kill herself. She came to this very cliff, where Dragonstar pushed her over. Stormcloud soon found out and jumped over as well, leaving Dragonstar with his kit.

However Flametail's kit, Leafkit, grew up into a fine warrior. Though Dragonstar tried to get rid of her, she soon proved far too popular and conned herself into deputy. One night, the two went out alone to the cliff where her parents had died and later that night, Leafstar returned with blood on her paws.

When she was asked what became of DragonClan's first leader, she replied, 'The black fox killed her, of course.'

Dragonstar's kit immediately knew this was a lie, and so dethroned the leader that Leafstar chose, and Echoheart, kin of Dragonstar, died laughing before the decapitated head of Leafstar's deputy, who had become leader after Leafstar took ill.

The cat who took over when both Echoheart and that leader died was known as Moonstar, and at the end of her reign, the black fox was supposedly vanquished for good.

That period of time, though scorned by our current day warriors, is known as the age of the fox. At first, it was revered, then feared, then joked about, and now it appears it has been forgotten. Still, Echoheart once, long ago, took a mate in the clan's medicine cat... and so for all we know, that blood is still being passed down today. This clan is far more feral than it looks, and vengeance burns within our blood. The fox lies within us all, so to speak. However... the clan has done a good job of suppressing it. We may yet atone for our ancestors' sins, and with it, the tunnels may cease to murmur nightmares and the dead can finally sleep. This may be the job passed onto you, vast as it seems."

I look at Knottedstar with horror, unable to speak.

"Do you understand?"

My eyes shift down to the bottom of the cliff. There are still clawmarks on the rock, and my imagination instantly places bloodstains where I can only infer there must have been in days long gone. Could I really be related to cats like that? "I understand, Knottedstar."

"Good." Knottedstar says, "Let's go home."

((Sorry to be so late! This whopper rests at 2300 words and I also wrote most of the next chapter today, but ended up splitting them apart. DC itself has also been busy, haha. Lots of old friends coming back- none of them except for me were around when this happened, but still, very old friends. That happens when your roleplay clan is

over two years old.
Speaking of such, some of you may recognize a lot of this from Vengeance, which is another finished book of mine that takes place IN Moonstar's period of leadership.

The fox is... well, the fox is real in that one.

However, ironically, a lot of us roleplayed the fox because it was an NPC character, so the darkness metaphorically lives in all of us.

Mainly me, though, because everyone else kept trying to attack people they didn't like with the fox instead of adhering to any sort of plot. eheheh))

Lust

Featherstar looks down at the brown ball of fur besides me and her face turns into a sad frown. "That's not yours, is it?"

"No. We found him in the woods. He looks past the age to nurse, but..." I trail off, looking towards the empty nursery.

"We have no queens." Featherstar confirms.

"We can't leave him to starve. Leafbare is cruel, especially up here."

"Tsk." She turns away. "I suppose he can stay with you as long as he doesn't get into any trouble. Prey has been especially good and he's very strong." She lowers herself to lick the kit's head. "Good luck, my friend."

I mutter, "We... I... chose a name for him."

"What is it?" she asks.

"He's Brownkit." I tell her.

"Not terribly creative, Ashleap."

I'm taken aback by the comment. "Come on, Featherstar."

"Only teasing." She exits the den, letting the sun shine on her fur. It's a convenient shade of pale gray, colored just so it's hard to tell if she's aging or not. I admit even I don't know.

Somewhere out there, Pyrewing is barking out commands to the other warriors. I feel pride stir within me. He'll be pleased to hear that Featherstar had no objection to me caring for the kit. Even if we'll never have children of our own... we can be a family.

"Do you hear that, Brownkit?" I ask the kit, whose eyes open to a miraculously beautiful gold as he mews, comforted by my presence.

"You're part of DragonClan now. Welcome home."

***

Thistlepaw races up to me and cuts under, swiping my leg. I fall down but get right back up and brace myself for his next attack. I slam down on his back with my forepaws, hoping to pin him, but he slides away. As his fur flies under me, I notice some old cuts on his back.

Oak leaves can be placed on cuts.

The thought throws me off balance just long enough for him to knock me over, pinning me in seconds.

"I'm down, I'm down." I hiss.

Thistlepaw gets up. "Sorry, Rushpaw. Are you okay?"

I struggle around him and lurch onto my paws. "Yeah."

"Goldenpaw, you two can spar next." Hazelwhisker mews. Goldenpaw pads towards me and we begin circling. I try to stay grounded in the moment despite how utterly bored I am, and with a loud hiss she jumps at me.

The first thing I notice is that she has a *huge long scar* down her side from a fight with some sort of woodland creature. Is she hurting?

That one could be infected. Do you think Tinyblossom has any wild garlic?

Seizing the moment, Goldenpaw slams her paw across my face. I fall back like a wounded bird, my body shaking with pain. Getting up proves to be exceptionally painful and wincing, I realize that there's a thorn buried into my back.

"That'll be enough for now." Scorchclaw says, his eyes wide with shock as to my sudden incompetence. "We should head back."

I turn to pick out the thorn, ignoring the others looking at me with desperate confusion.

"I'll meet you there." I tell them.

The clearing is empty when I finally leave. I return to camp, still disoriented, to find everyone else is already there. Of course I'm late... I must admit it doesn't bother me anymore. It's not like the other apprentices' friendships would make me feel any better during the day. I can struggle through it just fine by myself.

Jetpaw approaches me, tail waving. "Hey, Rushpaw! How was training today?"

"It was great!" I tell him, ignoring the stinging scars down my back. "I was just a little bit... off."

"Oh." he says. "So, uh... you're not with Novapaw, are you?"

"Not right now. I don't need to be with him every second of the day, do I?"

"N-no! I just never see you together anymore... and I was wondering if something was wrong."

"No." I flick my ears dismissively. "Nothing is wrong."
"Well... it is with me." Jetpaw whispers. "Tunnelkeeper training is a lot harder than I thought it'd be."

"What have you seen down there?" I ask, half scared, half curious.

"That's not important." he assures me. "Uh... see you later."

With that, he turns tail and scampers off. I frown after, but decide not to follow. After all, it's late and I should be getting to sleep. Brownkit needs me.

I lie down in my den and Sparrowpaw lies down besides me, a stupid smile plastered to his face.

"What?"

"Are you really going to sleep already?"

"Yes." I say, fluffing up the moss a little and turning around to lie

down again, facing away from him.

He gets up and walks to the other side, lying down again with another amused purr. "What?!" I spit the words out.

"Rushpaw, really? It's like you have no energy for anything nowadays. At this rate, you'll fall asleep during our warrior ceremony!"
"S'fine."

"Not really."

I don't bother replying.

Sure enough, my brother finally gets up, turning for a second before walking out of the den. I close my eyes tightly and hope that I can fall asleep.

***

I wake up to find darkness all around me. It isn't morning, so something is clearly wrong. Am I in old DragonClan again? Even after only two visits, my heart pulses with anticipation to be home- I mean there- again.

Dear StarClan, how much of my mind is actually mine?

I can feel hot breath on my back. I look down to see blood pooling around my paws. My neck pulses with pain and my head spins, leaving my vision blurry. As things begin to clear, the breathing on my back grows faster to match the beating of my heart and I turn around to look up at whoever's behind me.

A dark figure looms above me. I can hardly make out the details. Something about the situation is familiar. I feel my neck burn and remember the pain from other wounds. Am I bleeding? Did he tear open my neck?

Did Titanfoot get help?

"Are you going to kill me?" I ask the important question, though my voice comes out weak as a kit's.

"Never." The voice is familiar, yet equally deep and unknown at the same time. It sounds like something out of a nightmare. "I want you to come with me."

"Who are you?" I ask.

It does not speak. Golden eyes glimmer in the moonlight. Sharp ears are swivelled towards me. A puffed out tail swings in the shadow. Bright white teeth shine menacingly, beared into either a smile or the last snarl I'll ever see.

"Are you... are you..." I stutter, trying to edge backwards only to be caught as the terrifying figure creeps closer. I fall again, dirt flying upwards and the ugly red of my blood shining in the dirt.

It brings its face close to mine and with a deep breath, whispers into my ear. "I have seen things. Terrible, terrible things. I've made so many mistakes, Lunarshine..."

My pulse quickens. The black fox knows my name.

"What do you want from me?!" I hiss. Lunarshine bubbles to the surface, but mixed with her anger is perverted passion. This dream has become a nightmare.

"I demand your love." cooes the fox.

My heart drops dead. I scramble to my paws again, unsheathing claws sharp as his. His messy fur blows in the wind, and I look right into his eyes past his too-short, catlike muzzle and spit. "You're a monster. How can you say that with the blood of so many on your paws?"

"Not yet, my friend. You and I aren't that different. I've seen you on the walls of the tunnels."

"I will never love you. My heart belongs to Novapaw." I tell him, but I'm really thinking of Pyrewing, a cat who died endless seasons before I was even born.

The fox snarls, baring his teeth. I brace myself for him to finish the blow, but he merely says, "I knew you wouldn't understand. Don't

tell them where I've gone unless you want to be next." With that, he turns tail and retreats into the forest.

I try to run after him, but fall again, grass blades covered in my own blood greeting me as I continue to bleed freely into the grass. "P-please... anyone..."

Once again, the world fades around me and I fall back into the abyss.

***

I wake up to the familiar smell of herbs, but this time, I'm in modern DragonClan. I feel a quick burst of disappointment in spite of myself as Tinyblossom tends to me, her eyes full of pain and concern.

"Wha..." I ask, hardly able to form words from my sore throat.

"We found you in the forest. You were covered in blood, but we couldn't find any other scents there."

I look down to find that my own claws are bloodied.

"I know this may come as an odd question. I'm not claiming you tried it, but for now, this seems like the most likely conclusion. It's okay to tell me if you did and I'm only here to help you." She sighs deeply. "Rushpaw, did you try to kill yourself?"

I shake my head feverishly, my every breath short with panic. "The fox! The black fox was trying to kill me!"

"Rushpaw, it's alright to tell the truth."
"I'm not lying, Tinyblossom! I know what I saw!"

Tinyblossom nudges me several herbs, including some seeds wrapped within oddly shaped leaves. I eat them and feel my breathing slow, my panic ebbing away.

"The black fox is long dead." Tinyblossom says. "This is a dangerous nightmare you had."

I open my mouth, but the sunlight from the outside disappears and my eyes narrow to slits as Knottedstar enters the den. "A black fox, you say? What color eyes did this fox have?" Her calm tone makes me want to run my claws through her. It's so hard to resist the urge. How dare she ask me something so *stupid* when a murderous beast is loose in the woods?!

"Bright, piercing yellow eyes." I reply with a hiss. I can't forget a single detail of the encounter, even though I know Ashleap and I would rather forget the temptation of his darkness.

We belong with a monster.

No, we don't!

He doesn't even love you, you fool.

Shut up, both of you!

My claws sink into the moss.

Knottedstar replies, "I know another dark cat with golden eyes like those- another cat who just so happened to go missing this morning."

"Who?!" I ask, leaping to my paws. Was this all a trick?

No! He knew about Lunarshine! Whoever it was, if they know, I need to-

-kill them!
GET OUT OF MY HEAD!

Knottedstar's tail flicks. "Rushpaw, I know this may be hard to hear, and I'll definitely need to hear the details later... but you appear to be our only witness." She looks out at the forest, and then back at me. Her eyes are cold as she mutters, "Jetpaw has gone missing."

Rustic

Brownkit and I sit by the edge of my den until the rest of the clan gets up, sometimes.
Other times, he'll curl around me and I don't wake up until far later than the rest of the clan. This is what they meant when they said medicine cats shouldn't mate, I suppose. Having a family is one of the greatest things that ever happened to me, but even with a kit who needs little maintenance, he's quite the strain on my day.

Infernotail is far from being a fan of my poor kit, to make things worse. No matter what the situation, he's always grumbling or growling at Brownkit, who usually takes it in stride.

Today, he completely ignores him and bumps him out of the way to get to me. "Ashleap." he hisses. "We're out of tansy, cobweb, and mouse bile again."
"We are?" I ask, pacing after Brownkit. The stores were full last I checked. I might have missed a few days between returning here again. Sometimes it happens.

"Yes. If you weren't paying attention to the kit so much, you might have noticed by now." he says, knocking the kit away again. Brownkit mews this time, quite loudly, and I shoot Infernotail a warning glance as I walk to pick him up.

"You can leave him with Pyrewing. We need to go get herbs." Infernotail scoots past me, fast for a cat lugging around such a heavy cast on his back leg.

"Pyrewing is the deputy. He's busy." I tell him.

"I suppose the little mousebrain will have to fend for himself." he snaps, not taking 'no' for an answer.

"I'm not a mousebrain!" insists Brownkit.

"No, you aren't." I tell him, nudging Infernotail forcefully as I walk past him. "You be good, alright? The other warriors will take good care of you."

Brownkit nods forcefully, almost falling over as he does so. I purr with amusement and turn to leave. Infernotail snaps, "Come on, then." A little resentfully, I follow his lead and exit into the forest.

He limps along at a pace that equals my own, dragging his broken leg over the dirt over and over again, stirring the earth. His narrowed eyes focus on the horizon, leading us back out of the old forest and onto a hill littered with wildflowers. Something burns in my throat, something cold and disgusting. I look back towards the edge of the forest, down to where the land gives way and the cliff where Knottedstar told me about our history.

My thoughts return to Jetpaw, his foxlike demeanor in the darkness. How much of that was real and how much did I make up?

Luckily, Infernoleap pulls me away as he brushes his fur against mine. I find the landscape has changed and we've already walked halfway down the hill without me noticing. Something about his touch is ardent, so much more powerful than the lukewarm comfort of anyone back in my own time.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"Cobwebs." he tells me. "Thought we'd try the wheatfield."

I nod, though I have no idea what he's talking about until I look up and see an endless expanse full of golden grass three times my height before us, swaying ever so slightly for an almost waterlike effect.

He dives in and I follow, guided only by his tail and the continuous scraping noise his dragging leg makes. We finally emerge into somewhat of a clearing.The sky is cut into pieces by golden wheat and massive, oddly shaped twoleg stones that look vaguely like old monster parts.

Infernotail stares blankly at me. His fur is the dark color of the rust

festering on the huge twoleg rocks. "Well?"

I remember abruptly that he's angry at me, probably for replacing him with a kit. "We should gather the cobwebs and go home." I snap. "You need to stop guilt tripping me."

"Something's wrong with you these days. You hardly seem like the cat I once knew." he sniffs the air and looks away, as if to shun me without wasting the physical energy needed to do so.

"I suppose there is..." I tell him, "Though it's not even close to whatever's wrong with you. You can't seriously be jealous of a kit, can you?"

He snorts, picking the cobwebs off the old twoleg stones with a reproachful leer backwards.

***

The dawn patrol is just Cherrypaw, Crowpaw, Sunshade and I. It's small and full of young cats, which is unusual for such an important patrol, but the warriors seem far more tired than usual. As we pace the vast expanse of the clans, Sunshade stops to mark a border and I assist her, spreading my scent across the bushes and almost masking the disgusting scent beyond it.

"LionClan." Cherrypaw hisses. "Thank StarClan they're not around."

"There are far greater threats at the moment. For example, BrightClan lies beyond LionClan's territory. While we don't have direct access, they still managed to slink in and out to talk with Titanfoot, possibly by heavy scent concealing."

"BrightClan, huh? They still haven't come after their kits yet." Crowpaw says. "It's almost like..."

"They don't care." Cherrypaw finishes.

"That's because they don't." Her mentor, Sunshade snaps. "They wouldn't care unless it directly threatened their survival, and right now the only thing that threatens them..." Her claws unsheathe as she bends down. "Is us."

All of us take a second to watch the border, but no shadowy cats spring from the bushes to attack. Outside of our scents, everything else is stale. I get the notion that few clans care much about their borders. DragonClan only guards the west and the east, after all, most of the north is uninhabited, sacred ground.

"While we're out here, we might as well sweep the other borders in this area." Sunshade sighs, walking away from the LionClan border uneasily.

"What's wrong? You said it yourself. There's no scent here." I tell her, more than a little concerned.

She keeps padding along, picking up the pace a bit and leaving Cherrypaw to stumble along behind us. "That's the problem. They're planning something. I know it!"
"We can't base attacks on a hunch." Crowpaw says, helping Cherrypaw along. Her eyes are gold pools of moonlight, even in midday, and she looks far away as the moon is. "I still can't believe that someone would abandon their kits like that."

"Fear makes cats do terrible things." I tell her, certain examples on my mind, not the least of which is my own behavior.

Sunshade pauses, sniffing the air. I lift my own nose. Hidden amongst the forest's smell and the fresh scent of prey is a subdued scent of otherness. The other clan hasn't marked their territory in a long time."

"This one is FeatherClan's, right?" I say, the pungent smell unfamiliar and unwelcome.

"They haven't marked it at all, yet there's something... strong." Cherrypaw says, walking towards the edge with curiosity gleaming in her eyes.

"That's cat-scent. Someone's in the bushes." Sunshade hisses, pulling Cherrypaw away. "Everyone, on your guard!"

No patrol appears, though the bushes continue to rustle. The sounds grow faint, indicating our enemy is walking away. I poke my head

close to the bushes to get a closer look.

I can see him across the border. His dark fur is already tinted with their smell.

Jetpaw looks back into my eyes and shakes his head slowly. His mouth forms a quick word: "Later."
I pull away, the others looking on with anticipation.

"Who was it?" asks Cherrypaw.

"Just a FeatherClan warrior. They won't be bothering us anyways." I tell them.

"Thank StarClan." Crowpaw says. "For a second there, I thought you saw something interesting!"

((Early late update! I'm going to attempt the fabled double update today, though the Second Chances chapter promises to be FAR longer. Sorry for the wait on this one!))

Keeper

His pelt strokes against my own intimately as he draws nearer. I hiss quietly as his teeth come close to my neck, his smile all fox and no cat. He stays just heartbeats away from my throat, and then draws himself up so that we're eye to eye.

"What a disgusting sentiment."

***

My paws flail in every direction as I awake, hitting Novapaw in the side several times. He rolls over with a wheeze as he's hit, but to my surprise he doesn't wake up. Peering outside, I find the obvious answer: it's still dark as Jetpaw- *Stop thinking about him!*- out here.

I sit by the edge of the apprentice den, taking in the greenleaf air, which is familiar from blurry memories. I wonder how warriors, who have seen the same seasons over and over again, compile all of their memories from each season.

As I while away the moments, which I've become adept at doing in the aftermath of nightmares, the sun comes up and all the apprentices rush past me, suddenly awake. Goldenpaw, Crowpaw, Thistlepaw, Novapaw, Sparrowpaw, Sharppaw... no, that's it. I get up and amble after them.

We race through the empty camp, and I notice Gingerkit outside of the nursery. She's smiling in an awfully familiar way. My fur bristles up in a manner that would probably mortify any reasonable mother, if Gingerkit had one. Gingerkit squeaks as she sees me, bounding away into the nursery.

The guilt takes a moment to set in.

Ashlea- Rushpaw, terror of the night.

No, Ashleap and I aren't quite the same. One of us is a peaceful medicine cat with a family and a clear head. The other is an apprentice torn between two times.

Ashleap is *better*.

The apprentices finally stop before the leader's den. "What's going on?" I whisper.

"No one told you, huh?" Sparrowpaw sighs. "I thought that was Sharppaw's job."

"Typical Rushpaw. Never has any idea what's going on." Thistlepaw smirks.

"Maybe she should get her head out of the clouds." suggests Sharppaw.

"Maybe all of you should stop bickering. Knottedstar is about to explain the rules for our warrior assessment!" Goldenpaw snaps, and that's the end of it.

Knottedstar emerges from her den and stands before us like the cliff overlooks the valley, unknowable, unreachable. There is a stony quiet in her demeanor that indicates that we are standing on the brink of something terrible.

"The test is seemingly simple, though in its nature infinitely complex. We have not had apprentices do anything of the sort before. Your success or failure will determine if we use such methods again." Something about her words sounds eerily like a threat.

"So what are we doing?"

Cinderblaze emerges from the inside of Knottedstar's den. "You will be navigating the tunnels." Cinderblaze tells us.

"We'll what?" asks Thistlepaw. "How does that prepare us in any way for warriorhood?!"

Knottedstar looks down at him with profound interest. "How does one afternoon of prey demonstrate that you have the loyalty or courage to continue said work for the rest of your life? The tunnels were used to assess the very first apprentices, long before our clan and long before the clan from which our first leader came. They were different tunnels, and there were different cats. It is true some anomalies have occurred in the tunnels before. Cinderblaze, Emeraldlight, and myself will be watching your progress, along with your mentors. If you do not return by sundown, we will organize patrols to save you."

No one argues. Sheepishly, Thistlepaw says, "So... what do we have to do?"

"There is a single tunnel up by the north, where the old camp was. We have marked a scent trail to it. You have the whole day to get there. You may not go above ground except for to check where you have come out and if you need help, do not yowl. You will attract... attention. Instead, stay where you are or if there's an exit nearby, dismiss yourself from the assessment entirely."

"That's all?" asks Crowpaw, astounded.

"That is all." Knottedstar assures her. "Are you ready to begin?"

"Yes!" we all say at once. Though the others look astounded by how easy this seems, I'm astounded that Knottedstar of all cats would send us down into the tunnels.

It occurs that this is a test for me especially, not just them.

Knottedstar leads us out of camp and the air grows still. A tunnel sits in the earth near the undergrowth as we approach it. Though I have seen it a million times before, the darkness in its depths is unsettling.

"You may begin." Knottedstar says, and one by one, we file into the underground. It's hard, as all of us barely fit, and must push ourselves in. Despite this, I smell Knottedstar's scent behind me and know that she can do it as well. While she seems larger than us, most of it is fur and good posture. As I continue deeper, her scent

recedes and all I have is Thistlepaw's tail before me.

Soon, that too disappears into the darkness. Perhaps he made a turn somewhere I didn't and I continued. The disgusting earth is becoming suffocating, and yet...

Almost there.

I emerge into a wider chamber, big enough for me to walk around comfortably. I take in the scent of musty air and my nose burns.

At least now I'm able to look around. Unfortunately, I can't see much and there's no scent. I know I haven't turned from when I entered, so if I keep going, I should be home free to the north. I pile into another tunnel, a smaller one, and keep crawling. This emerges into another chamber. There's old badger smell, but this is clearly dormant. Nothing to fear.

I repeat this until my paws burn, and to my own delight, the smell picks up again.

Yes.

There's a crack in the next chamber. I've broken something beneath my paws.

Two eyes glimmer gold in the darkness, large and owllike. For a second, I think it's another cat. Has one of the mentors come to help me?

My eyesight has adjusted too well. Though I can't see detail, I see enough to know the beast before me is not a cat at all.

It looks like the creatures from my dreams, with too many limbs and mouth extended to an unnatural degree and curved into an unnatural upward slant. It speaks but all I can hear is loud moaning that trails off into a whimper.

It begins inching towards me, dragging itself along with every leg and every arm, and I edge backwards towards the chamber corner. Stone hits my back and I turn, looking for an escape.

It screeches even more loudly, picking up its gait, and I race around it. Something cold and slimy grabs my leg and I can't stop running. My paws burn as I turn into a tunnel and another one greets me in the next area.

"What do you want?!"

No answer.

"WHAT DO YOU WANT?!"

"Thistlepaw, where are you?" echoes a voice from above me.

Crowpaw.

"Don't leave me."

"Don't leave me down here alone."

I can't save her now.

Run!

It's almost on me when I look up.

My heart beats like that of a mouse right before it dies, for the few seconds when you hold a living creature in your paws and dangle its pitiful life in front of it.

I'm the prey now.

I stumble and fall, but to my surprise there's nothing there but me. The room is pleasantly warm and something makes my coat tingle. Sunlight. Has it been one day or four seasons?

I pace towards it, finding I don't care about my assessment anymore, and my paw hits something with a crack.

Bone.

Who died here?

Was it you?

There are flowers growing around the bones. An aster flower grows through the skull, taking in the small amount of sunshine from above.

I sniff the air. There's no smell. It's the wrong passage.

Give up.

I can't.

I want to.

I can't.

I feel unnerved without knowing why. Looking down, I place it- the skull is familiar. The slope of it. The length of the legs. The fragile ribcage that one carried a heart that beat for an entire clan, the eye sockets that once held orbs that saw demons, the tail with flowing gray...

My paws are shivering and I don't know why.

Why did I...

Your own body.

Your own flesh.

Which voice?

You can scream all you want. They'll never hear you.

Ashleap died in the tunnels.

I back away from the ugly ground, fear overwhelmingly strong, and flee. The scent. It's going to be over soon. I have to finish the assessment or some part of me will be stuck here forever.

The darkness engulfs me.

Surely, Lunarshine would know them like the back of her own paw, wouldn't she?

Oh no.

She's more afraid than I am.

In the darkness, the coarse texture of shadow brushes my own fur. A familiar scent catches the air.

A fox wails and I land on my back, struggling for breath as it dives at my throat. Blood opens up from old scars, new wounds interlocked with old ones. I hyperventilate as I stare into Jetpaw's foxish face.

He leans close to my ear, his eyes dreamlike. My heart beats like it does around Pyrewing and Novapaw, now commingled with pure icy fear. "What a disgusting sentiment."

"Yours or mine?" I ask.

He bends closer. "Would you like to find out?"

Everywhere on my body burns and my eyes grow wide. My every breath is fast as I'm held against my will, unable to move and barely able to think. The gut reaction is instant. A single paw gets loose of his grip and I aim straight for the throat, like a rogue. Instead of stopping and scraping down his chest, I dig further and further into the flesh.

He looks at me in shock before his body crumbles into the dirt.

Red. It's all over my paws.

It's just mud. It's just mud. It's just mud.

Fake fake fake fake *fake fake fake.*

I stumble back again, almost at the point of exhaustion, and like StarClan's voice in the darkness I catch the smell.

The last tunnel.
The exit.

I climb frantically upwards, the earth getting into my mouth and

my fur but I don't care anymore. In desperation, I screech as I pull up onto solid ground. The north blows through my fur, the prevalent breezes against the hazy and slightly nostalgic warmth of greenleaf in the old camp.

Knottedstar looks down at me and warmth fills her gaze. I've never seen her so happy as she lifts me up, grooms me with her own tongue.

My breathing stills slowly. The sun is setting in the distance.

I made it.

"You passed." Knottedstar tells me. "Congratulations." The words are maternal. Does Knottedstar know what I've been through in the darkness?

Have the other apprentices experienced as much as I have? I turn around to see them all already there, purring and gossiping as usual- nonetheless, their conversations are a bit quieter than normal, and no one is play fighting or screeching petty insults.

I can't tell if it's because of my absence both mentally and physically from their group for such extended periods of time. Maybe it's because we're tired and ragged from crawling around in the tunnels all day. No matter what it is, they seem to have aged years within a single afternoon. There are ghosts inside their eyes. There's light where there shouldn't be. There's shadow where there wasn't before.

Do you think that they saw...

No.

No. I repeat their sentiment, unaware of who said what.

No and who cares?!
It's over.

Triumphant

Never has a summer day seemed so cold. There is a freezing sensation to all of it, a chill, something that rushes up my spine and makes me shiver just at the thought of it.

Fear. Anticipation.

Why? What could they possibly say? I passed.

No, it's unreasonable to be afraid of something like becoming a warrior or not. There's something far more sinister than that in the works here. I look to my fellow apprentices, and notice how all of the ones bound to be warriors today are awake yet none of them are outside.

They're not talking to each other.

"Hello?" I ask. My ears flatten. Something is unnatural about me breaking the silence. I'm the quiet one, after all. They don't know why I was so quiet, which is a relief, but there's some semblance of order, silly or not, that should be kept.

You don't know what they saw down there.

Sharppaw answers first, to my surprise. "Hello, mousebrain. Trying to wake us all up?"

Some things never change.

"She's right. We should be awake. After all..." Goldenpaw trails off as she gets up to her paws, "It's a big day for us all."

"That's mouse dung. Let me go back to sleep." mutter Sharppaw contemptfully.

"She just said hello. I'm pretty sure this entire argument is mouse dung." Thistlepaw states.

"Too bad, because we're going. Right now. All of you." Crowpaw says, unusually aggressive as she pushes us all up. Her eyes are large and sympathetic as they meet mine, as if she feels sorry for me.

We walk through the camp and no one is talking. A few cats have their heads bowed in mourning. I squint upwards to see the sun is already high in the sky, burning my eyes as it sneers at me.

Knottedstar sits on the Highfall, and we walk over as a group. At least half the clan is finally there. The roar of the waterfall is louder than usual, an angry ambience to break the silence of the cats sitting just to the side of it.

The others clear out when we sit down. Even Carbonfrost looks disappointed in me. I meet his gaze and silently ask him what I'm doing wrong, but he doesn't even shake his head.

We all turn as Knottedstar begins speaking, her voice just as powerful as ever over the crashing water. "I know many of you are wary about these ceremonies. It is true they have come at an unprecedented time. However, the accident with Amberstreak and Snowpelt had nothing to do with their warrior trials. Instead, our evidence indicates that Amberstreak returned to camp with everyone else and returned to the tunnels later that night. Snowpelt may or may not have gone down there with her, or she might have gone after her. Regardless, it is true that both of their bodies were found in the tunnels, close to the skull of what appears to be another victim. There was dark black fur found next to the body with no discernable scent. That is all the facts we currently have."

The clan seems restless even with this answer. I look around with disgust. Did nobody think to tell any of us?!
"Knottedstar, have you stopped to consider that this disappearance coincides with Jetpaw's?"

Knottedstar sighs. "We still have no leads as to where Jetpaw went. He could just as well be dead with Amberstreak and Snowpelt. For now, we will have no replacement tunnelkeeper and no one is to go into the tunnels under any circumstances. Am I clear?"
No one replies to Knottedstar's furious glare, and she takes that as

agreement. The clan is distraught over both warriors, but Amberstreak was not only a senior warrior but a deputy. Her silent kindness and authority will be missed by the clan, including myself... though we rarely spoke.

A pang of regret washes over me. I hardly knew both she-cats.

Knottedstar continues, "I ask the seven elder apprentices to step up. Rushpaw, Novapaw, Sparrowpaw, Sharppaw, Thistlepaw, Goldenpaw and Crowpaw, please step forwards." We step onto the rock beneath her, staring up into her eyes as we did so many moons ago.

"I, Knottedstar, present to all of you this day these apprentices in the hopes that they might grow into the leaders and warriors we so desperately need. Out of the darkness comes great light, and in the same way these warriors come to us in our time of greatest necessity. Rushpaw, Novapaw, Sparrowpaw, Sharppaw, Thistlepaw, Goldenpaw and Crowpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend this clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Silence.

The waterfall.

My heart.

Their breath.

Everything comes to a single moment.

We answer as one. "I do."

Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior names. Novapaw, from this moment you will be known as Novablaze. StarClan honors your bravery and courage. Sparrowpaw, from this moment you will be known as Sparrowsong. StarClan honors your kindness and integrity. Sharppaw, from this moment you will be known as Sharpfoot. StarClan honors your tenacity and determination. Thistlepaw, from this moment you will be known as Thistleheart. StarClan honors your wit and skill in battle.

Goldenpaw, from this moment you will be known as Goldenfire. StarClan honors your intelligence and devotion. Crowpaw, from this moment you will be known as Crowfeather. StarClan honors your compassion and optimism.

Now, finally... Rushpaw."

I stand perfectly still. Her eyes meet mine and I feel my heart stop. I never realized how much I cared about the present until this moment.

"From this moment on, you will be known as Rushcall. StarClan honors your loyalty and determination. We welcome all of you as Warriors of DragonClan."

"Novablaze! Sparrowsong! Sharpfoot! Thistleheart! Goldenfire! Crowfeather! Rushcall!" There are so many names that the clan only calls them all three times, but all three are heartfelt and louder than a thousand Highfalls.

Knottedstar silences them with only a single step forwards. "I have a new announcement. As you know, following Amberstreak's death, a new deputy must be chosen. While this may be unconventional... I believe one cat in this clan has the potential to be a great leader. Novablaze, you will continue Maplepaw's training in the wake of Cloudpelt's death, and you will be the new deputy of DragonClan."

His mouth opens in protest, but there are no words that come out.

The clan erupts in dissent, and Knottedstar jumps down the rocks back to where we stand and drags him along with her. The rest of the clan follows, including the other former apprentices.

"This is so odd..." I mutter to myself. "Tunnels. What could have happened-"

A voice whispers, "The fox got her." Thistlepaw- heart.

My fur stands straight on end.

I'm not taking this.

"Thistleheart, if you know something, you better-" I wheel around angrily, but he's gone.

***

Moments before our vigil, all of us meet up again.

The silence from that morning is back.

"So." Sharpfoot starts us off strong.

"So." echoes Crowfeather.

Novablaze looks around uncomfortably. "This was so unexpected." "I can't think of anything like this ever happening before. Why would Knottedstar put you as the new deputy?" Goldenfire asks, then quickly adds, "Not that you aren't capable."

"I was aiming for it, but this feels too sudden. Too fast." Novaflare shakes his head.

"That's not the worst of it. It was so cold today. Everyone was acting like we murdered Amberstreak ourselves." Crowfeather says sadly. "What did we do?"

"Don't even get me started on the tunnels." Thistleheart scoffs.

Everyone turns to him.

"There were ... some things I saw down there. I thought I was going mad. For a second, I thought it was more than a delusion. That... maybe... some of you had seen the same things." Thistleheart finishes, looking around with an expression that implies he doesn't want to know the answer.

"Of course not." echo a few of us at different times, a cacophony of uneasy mews filling the air and resting on it with a cold certainty.

Silence returns to the clearing, a chill wind blowing over our fur, an oddity against the muggy greenleaf that has once again returned to DragonClan.

"So..." Sparrowsong says cautiously, "What did you see?"

Vigil

They say that silence was once required during the vigil, and while the rule isn't enforced anymore, any warrior we wake will have the sympathy of a rabid badger. In that way, the spirit of the silent vigil lives on.

As I take my place with the others, the silence between us lingers. No one had spoken up earlier, and Thistleheart had declined to say anything on what he had seen, so all of us remained in the dark. Shadows slowly roll across the land like a stretching cat, arching its back before smoothing all the way out as it pushes the sun across the edge of the sky and out of sight.

The warriors of StarClan take their dawn patrols, appearing one by one from the darkness, and Novablaze, the last of us to arrive, takes a seat far away from me on a rock on the northern border. While nothing can really attack from above the stone ledge (except for birds), it gives us a great aerial view of camp in case something was to attack.

"Nice to see you." I say quietly.

"Indeed." he mews, too disoriented by the day to say much more. I decide to leave well enough alone for the time being, instead turning my head skywards and watching the rest of the stars emerge one by one. Their presence is comforting. I feel less isolated knowing that if something was to attack camp, the stars would see us.

I suppose they wouldn't help very much (that's a job for the living), but I'd give anything to see Brownkit again. It's been a quarter of a moon since my last old DragonClan dream.

"It's odd." Sparrowsong starts, "Why would Knottedstar choose us to take the tunnel challenge?"

"She's testing us." I reply. "She does that sometimes."

"Why?" Sharpfoot asks. "If you were behind this, I swear..."

"What's the problem?" I ask, my voice sharp. "You all seemed to think it would be easy. Surely if you've spent so much of your valuable apprenticehood besting someone weak as me, you would have learned the proper skills?" She'll get no sympathy from me.

"I barely talked to you." she snaps. "A-and if I struggled with the test, that's none of your business. We all passed."

"Barely." sighs Crowpaw. "I had no idea the tunnels were like that..."

All eyes turn to her again. She might be the one to spill.

"You know what? We can have a little storytime. If I share, so do all of you." she bluffs.
"Fair enough." Novablaze agrees.

"Who goes first?" Goldenfire asks.

"I suppose I do." she sighs. "I had planned to do the entire assessment with Thistleheart. He's the best tracker I know, and for some reason he wanted me along, though I didn't ask. However, when we got into the tunnels, I turned around and he was gone. I felt breathing on me in the dark, but I couldn't identify it. The entire time was pure torture. I would hear voices. See eyes in the shadows. No matter what I did, there was always that constant breath. When I saw the sunlight, I resolved never to go down there again." she finishes, than looks to her left, at Thistleheart, who grunts.

"Fine. Same thing. Lost Crowfeather pretty early in. At one point there was this ugly bald cat, but it had way too many limbs. It was grabbing me and I was scared, soo... I killed it. As it died, it kept calling for someone named... "Lunarshine"."

My fur stands up on end.

"That was weird too. After that, I kept hearing barking, so I looked around and there was a shadowy fox standing in a passage between

two of the larger rooms. I lept at him, but this time it was more of a fair fight. I noticed that he had blood on his lips and was already bleeding. He was a terrifyingly good fighter for being injured. However, his injury got the better of him and he stumbled. Before I could attack him too, he had disappeared." He licks some old wounds. "Next?"

Goldenfire sighs. "I'm afraid I was the first one to meet the fox you speak of. He gave me some markings to remember, but I couldn't shake how familiar he looked. He could have killed me easily, but he fled. I also... well, I'm sure you all saw this, but there were markings down there. Blood on every wall. Something lives down there. The entire experience was unnerving, to say the least."

Sharpfoot picks up, "I ended up completely lost. I called out for Knottedstar but she never showed up. At one point, I saw one of the mentors and ran after them, but then I lost them to. There was a bunch of screaming so I turned back only to find myself facing some other crazy. She kind of looked like Amberstreak, but her eyes were gone. She started asking me if I knew where Sparrowsong was, but I told her I didn't know. She said I should listen for singing, but then I ran. That was when I found the exit. Next!"

Novablaze looks suspiciously around. "They're haunted. They have to be. I saw all of these small kits, barely old enough to be out of the nursery. I tried to steer clear of them, but then one of them turned to me and asked me to join him. I followed him until he came to the edge of something, and when I looked down, I realized that the tunnel gave way into the depths. He told me that a real leader would jump. When I left, I was assaulted by a badger."

Sparrowsong finishes, shaking at my side as he does so. "I thought I was alone, but I kept hearing son- I mean... voices. Other voices. So I knew I was close by to someone else in the party. I followed their... voice... and instead of another cat, I was approached by an animal with claws like a badger and no face. She told me to sing and I couldn't. When I tried to run away, she pressed her claws in until I started screaming. I was saved just in time by Knottedstar, but then she disappeared too. Luckily, no one else showed up after that."

I hesitate. "I don't know if I want to speak." My story was far more personal than theirs. Though the tunnels frightened them all, very little about their stories was revealing. On the other paw, if they knew who the black fox really was, I doubt they'd be happy to know that I-

You what?

"If you have anything to say, Rushcall..." Goldfire warns.

"We'll understand! We're all friends here, right?" Crowfeather finishes.

They'll never understand. They're just common warriors.

I sigh. There's so many details to omit, but I think they deserve at least part of the truth. "You... you've heard I'm dangerous, right? I... I'm born from two other warriors. Their spirits live within me. While I was down there, I felt called to them both. Something about their presence almost killed me and then saved me. I met the fox, too." I say.

"I feel lied to." Goldenfire admits. "You. The tunnels. How much have we not been told?"

"It's mainly forgotten." Sparrowsong sighs. "There's no greater conspiracy hiding it from us. We're all warriors now and we never heard. We aren't kits. There's no reason to pretend anyone older than us is out to get us."

"Knottedstar knows something." Novablaze insists. "I'll try to talk with her."

"So does Rushcall." Sharpfoot points out. "What have you not told us, you dirty liar?"

"I am not!" I hiss. "What I do and don't know was never important before. I can help you with what I know now, but I reserve a right to privacy!"

"If one of your spirits has anything to do with the dead... with the tunnels... You need to talk to her." Goldenfire urges. I think of

Lunarshine and my ears fall. I don't want to interact with her, and yet...

If I haven't had any dreams in such a long time, perhaps it's for some greater reason.

"I'll try my best." I tell them, my voice catching on the words.

"We don't know that will be enough." Thistleheart hisses.

"Shush, you." Goldenfire purrs, batting him over the ear. Despite the lightness in her tone, no one else dares reply. She dips her head. "We just have to make it through the night, then?"

The stars offer no reply, nor do my clanmates. Both are tired and cold, offering no warmth or light.

"Silence it is." I tell her, secretly glad of it.
I pull myself close to Nova. He attempts to scoot away again, but suddenly turns and stops to sit back down by my side.

As the sun begins to rise, he puts his head on my shoulder and I feel my heart pulse a little faster.

It's a blur by the time the clan awakens. I remember falling asleep on the hard ground of the warrior's den and little more.

My eyes open in a new landscape, one of subdued blues and endless hills. At the top of the one before me sits a single, solitary cat, watching the world below her with resigned interest.

"Lunarshine." I speak her name and she turns around. I feel my own heart pulsing in my chest. Her pulse is synchronized with mine and the two beats pulse together into one, kindred souls in the deserted landscape.

I take a closer look at one of the two halves of my soul. She's a darker gray with a sort of bluish tint to her fur. Her fur is shorter and more disheveled than Ashleap's. Her eyes are a stunning dark blue, peering into my soul as I stare defiantly back at hers. There are scars lacing across her back, scars that have never healed where fur has never grown back again.

What do you want, Ashleap?
I almost react to the name, but I still myself and shake my head. "It's just me, Rushcall."

Rushcall is both of us. I would know if we were Rushcall right now. She separates when we sleep.

I think of another dream I once had with Ashleap, where she first showed me the abominations that lurk in the tunnels. "Not true."

How can the river flow if there is no water? How can the birds chirp if their vocal cords are torn out? Both of those things stand a better chance of occurring than Rushcall without us both consciously being her.

I decide to drop the argument. "So what do you do when you're not m- her?"

We are both birds in a tiny cage, spirits who would rather go free. Unfortunately, I condemned myself to this job. I usually sit here, behind her closed eyes. What do you do, Ashleap?

"Why?" I ask, finally getting to the question.

None of your business.

"Does it lie in your past?" I ask.

Why does that concern you?

"It's the only way I'll ever really understand you."
Her mouth curves into a twisted smile. *You made a deal without knowing who you were talking to. I still can't believe you wanted to come back to this world, with such a beautiful universe to explore and otherwise, great rest in StarClan.* It fades as she looks up and away from me, back at the dull blue sky. *I can't believe you did something like that when you were still loved. You'll never understand how lucky you are, you fool.*

The verbal blow strikes both Ashleap and myself. My ears flatten and I say, "You were loved."

I was not.

"There is no proof." I say defiantly. Surely even Lunarshine was loved by someone. The first tunnelkeeper could not have been that cruel.

There is my past.

"Would you show me?"

She narrows her eyes and purrs, "We go together." Her form phases into mine, filling me with a rush of elation. I feel suddenly full, as if before I was merely a shadow of myself, but there's no other discernable change. Maybe Lunarshine was right of me only being a shadow without the other part of myself.

What is that part?
The answer must lie somewhere. I step forwards and the grass ripples beneath me like water. Wary, I take more steps and notice it growing thinner, the water everywhere. Another paw hits the water and gives way, sending me plunging into the depths.

I look up as sun filters in through seemingly nowhere, and a voice calls from the darkness as I slip under it.

Moon

The moon is on top of the sun, the two astral bodies gripping each other like lovers as the bright rays of light flare out around them in every direction. Both are well aware this will be the last time.

The first thing the kit smells is the milk of her mother.

The second is blood.

It is very ugly. If not for her instinct to suckle on her mother's milk, she would have gagged and died.

That would have been preferable. At least then her sister would be strong.

In the wake of the deaths of the previous sun and moon, the mother cat decided to name her children new names.

"This one is Lunarkit." For the moon.

"This one is Solarkit." For the sun.

The sun is much brighter and warmer than the moon, but the moon gets to be closer to the stars. Those who love the sun will never touch it. They are stuck on the earth as it falls away from the sun, and it is stuck in the sky where no one will love it.

***

On the fifth day, Solarkit got stuck in the sky.

She didn't come down.

***

On the tenth day, Lunarkit opened her eyes and there was still

blood on the ground. One of the older kits, Featherkit, was sitting at the edge of the camp watching the forest. No one noticed the blood.

"The earth is crying red," Lunarkit told her mother.

Her mother shook her head.

"The earth is screaming," Lunarkit told her father.

Her father did not hear her.

"The earth needs to be cleansed." Lunarkit told the leader.

The leader looked off into the distance. She was in pain.

***

"Who was buried in the earth?" Lunarkit asked a moon later.

No one would tell her.

She asked everyone. Featherkit answered her. "I was there when they died."

"When who died?"

"There was a prophecy." Featherkit said. "The sun and moon collided and in the light, everyone could see the darkness inside of each other."

"What did it look like?"

"Foxes. They were made out of shadows."

"Was it terrifying?"

"The darkness is never scary. It's what they did with it."

***

In two moons, Featherpaw became an apprentice.

Lunarkit was lonely.

She decided to get a gift for her friend, who knew about the darkness and protected her.

She went into a field of aster flowers, but all of the seeds stuck to her.

When she tried to get them off, she fell into a tunnel where the earth screamed. There were bones beneath her feet and no light. As she ran away, the seeds fell into a dead place and there was life again, life woven together from moonlight and the last traces of sun.

How the flowers grew where there was nothing to grow from, she never knew.

***

Featherpaw did not like flowers.

***

Featherpaw did not like she-cats either.

***

Featherpaw was later found over a cliff in the old territory.

Her body was cold and unfamiliar.

It smelled like the moon.

***

Lunarpaw ran away into the darkness again.

***

The darkness spoke to Lunarpaw.

"Why are you crying?" it asked.

"I am broken." she replied. "I will never love or be loved."

"We are all broken." the darkness whispered. "Only the universe is full, because the universe is made of all the broken pieces. It reunites them."

"I am not the universe." she said.

"You can be part of it."

***

Lunarpaw became part of the darkness.

There were lines on the walls.

There were flower seeds in the tunnels.

Sometimes there was even gold coming from outside.

Gold is not just light underground.

It is a marriage of the below and the above. It is now both.

It is worlds looped together.

Lunarpaw was still looking for the light.

***

"You are not a warrior." Talonstar said.

So they made her a tunnelkeeper.

***

They were very interested in her.

"Lunarshine," echoed the walls of the tunnels.

"Lunarshine," echoed the camp.

"Lunarshine," echoed her head.

His mouth came dangerously close to her ear and he whispered.

He wanted to see the world.

She had no need to see everything. She was already a part of it.

Her part was to unite the dark and the light.

***

She left the seeds of aster flowers over his grave when he died.

It was not his fault.

There were rogues in the territory.

Another young and foolish tom had been watching her.

***

They didn't plant anything over his grave when he died.

***

No one found his grave.

***

No one found the grave of the next cat either.

***

They were getting in her way.

***

"Lunarshine," echoed the darkness.

The darkness was a cat.

The darkness was light.

The darkness had aster flowers growing through her eyes and she was beautiful.

***

Can you fall in love with someone who does not exist?

***

What about someone who no longer exists?

***

What if you died, too?

***

The cats were listening to the nightmares now. There were voices in their ears and ghosts inside their eyes.

She told them not to go into the tunnels.

***

What if the cat with flowers inside her eyes didn't like she-cats either?

***

There were too many voices now.

***

The cliff.

***

Too obvious.

***

The next tunnelkeeper had no idea what he was doing. That didn't matter anymore.

***

She's here.

***

She doesn't really have aster flowers inside her eyes. Her eyes are gold like the sun and Lunarshine is the moon. The cat was standing with her mate. Lunarshine had disposed of toms before.

***

"I need you," said Lunarshine. "I need you to save me."

She had already saved so many lives. Lunarshine had already taken so many.

***

Ashleap stood in front of her mate. She was cautious.

"I need you to save DragonClan. There is a world that needs us."

***

Ashleap said yes.

They were one.

Everything was darkness and friendship and sin and foxes and the sun and the moon fell over each other again.

***

Is that all?

That is all there is to see.

There's so little.

There was not very much to say.

Kindred

"Well?" I wake up in the warrior's den with Sparrowsong standing over me, thrusting his head into my face until our noses are almost touching. His fur is dyed red from the sun, which is already setting outside.

Right. The ceremony.

My ears flatten as I look upwards and murmur, "What?"

"You said you'd try to get the answers from one of your souls. I know I'm not usually excitable, but we all want the answers so we can put all the pieces in order as soon as possible." He seems terribly anxious, but my head still burns from staying up all night and even sleeping through the whole day has hardly quelled my desire to lay down in my comfortable new warrior den until leaffall.

"Let me up first." I say, struggling underneath him, and he unpins me, stepping away so that I can get to my paws and stretch as far as I can.

He waits quietly, tail flicking. Pensively, he gazes out at the rest of the camp, where the warriors are already filtering back in through the trees and Novablaze stands adamantly with his apprentice. She seems bewildered by how much attention the clan is paying both of them.

Quietly, I think about a young gray kit who was promised the position of deputy long ago by a cat who seemed to have all the answers. Now, I watch Novablaze and pity his position. I no longer have any desire to be deputy, much less leader.

"You're still asleep, aren't you?" Sparrowsong purrs, misinterpreting my silence. "I don't blame you. Most of us woke up about halfway through the day, and we were still exhausted. We would have woken you up too, but you were trembling in your sleep and

muttering things and no one wanted to interfere."

"I was?" I say, feeling embarrassment stir in my chest. Hopefully I hadn't said anything too stupid. Lunarshine was a dangerous individual, after all.

Then again, after what I'd seen... it was hard not to sympathize with her.

"Yeah. Something about someone named Featherpaw. You were crying their name over and over again." he says. Lowering his ears, he adds, "What happened to them? Did they die?"

"Her. Lunarshine was in love with her, and then she killed herself." I tell him. I plan on not leaving a single detail out of the story. While I don't want to speak about my time as Ashleap (a story that may not be over yet, for all I know) after hiding it for so long, I regret not saying more about it when it started. I might have done things differently with their advice, but now there's no way I can bring myself to tell them.

"You said... Lunarshine is a she-cat, right?" Sparrowsong asks, confused.

"Yes."

"And Featherpaw?"

"Yes."

Sparrowsong doesn't go any further. Instead, he walks out of the den, turning for me to follow.

Grateful for his silence, I follow him through the camp to where the other newly made warriors are. Despite our new status, we're still clumped very firmly together. The bond the former apprentices share will never change, no matter what happens. It's reassuring.

"Thank StarClan you finally woke up. We had a bet with the other warriors that if you didn't stop meowing in your sleep, we'd have to throw you into the river so you wouldn't wake everyone in the camp up." Thistlepaw says, full of his usual snark.

Goldenfire cuffs him over the ear with one of her front paws. "Stop being so cheeky, Thistleheart. Nice to see you finally woke up, Rushcall."

"It's nice to finally be awake. I had no idea I overslept that much."

"More like we underslept." Sharpfoot glares at Thistleheart. "A certain someone woke us all up."

"Please don't fight. You're giving me a headache." Crowfeather pushes herself between them both.

"I already have a headache." Sharpfoot says grumpily.

"So what? Right now, we have more important things to speak about." Goldenfire stares into my eyes, trying to guess what lurks beneath them. "Tell us everything you saw."

My heart pounds uncontrollably, my body fighting itself as half of my soul grapples to stop me.

Don't do it.

I open my mouth and then close it again.

Please.

"What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?" crows Thistleheart.

"Thistleheart, I swear to StarClan, I will rip your tongue out myself." hisses Sharpfoot.

"Woah, hold up there. No need to be so... spirited!" replies the tom gleefully.
Everyone wails in disgust appropriately.

"Alright, I'll talk!" I say, playing off of the silence. "Please, just don't make any more terrible puns. It starts with a kit born beneath an eclipse, when the earth bled and everyone could see the darkness within us for a few terrifying moments..."

***

"With that, there was an eclipse of souls, and this time, the light and the darkness were bonded forever." By the time I finish, the other warriors are watching us with a mixture of interest and exasperation. Though I know I just slept, I'm ready to turn in for another night myself, but I still have questions to contend with.

"Was that all?" asks Thistleheart, sniffing. "Awfully short story."

"Why did she kill them?" Crowfeather says, eyes large and kitlike.

"You're half of that?!" Sharpfoot exclaims. "Explains a lot."

"Thank you for telling us. I know that must have been hard to get out." Sparrowsong purrs, nudging me.

I don't know what to say to any of their comments, so I just quietly dip my head.

"What about your other soul?" Goldenfire asks. "Have you seen any of her?"

My fur bristles on my back, but I try to keep it straight. I can't give away anything more now, so I'll have to tread carefully. "Ashleap." I tell her, then add, "Bits and pieces."

"What was her life like?" Sparrowsong asks.

"Warm. Beautiful. She was surrounded by cats who loved her and a clan who needed her." I tell them, trying to suppress the envy and longing I felt throughout my apprenticeship.

"What were the cats of old DragonClan like back then?" asks Crowfeather.

"A lot more like us." I assure her. "They were kinder back then. To be honest... they kind of reminded me of all of you."

"We're all kin, aren't we?" Crowfeather purrs. "Perhaps we are like them, after all."

"If only. DragonClan suffered a huge loss in blood generations before us, and then rogues started piling in. It would be a miracle if

a single drop of pure DragonClan blood still remained in the clan." Goldenfire says solemnly.

"There are other ways to be kin besides blood relation." Sparrowsong says, looking at all of them in turn. "Anyhow, I should be off to sleep. I need to get back on my regular sleep schedule if I want to hunt in the morning."

"Count me in." Thistleheart says.

"Make that all of us." Goldenfire says, nudging us towards the warrior's den like a protective queen. She pushes me onto my den and purrs, "You definitely need some more rest. This time, let's hope your dreams have considerably less genocidal psychopaths intent on becoming one with ancient medicine cats."

I want to tell her how wrong she is and how little she clearly got from what I was saying, but I decide against it. Even in the way I had told it, it was hard to gloss over just how many cats Lunarshine had killed. Even in the fragments I got of her life, I could see close to a dozen dead at her paws.

Yet through all this, the leader took little to no action...

Could it be that he condoned it?

I think of Ashleap's warmer, happier DragonClan and sigh. For all I'd like to believe, our DragonClan is closer to Lunarshine's.

That would make me her, wouldn't it? Knottedstar's killing machine.

"Rushcall?" asks Sparrowsong, jolting me from my thoughts. "If you have two souls, what will happen when you go to StarClan?"

"I don't know." I say. I'd never thought of it before.

Ice creeps down my spine. There's always one option I had never even accounted for...

What if Ashleap and Lunarshine separate when I die? What if... no.

Some part of me refuses to register it, a part that isn't either of them. It's instinct. I can't simply stop existing. It's not natural. It's not *fair*.

Nothing is ever fair for any of us. You're going to learn that the hard way.

As I lie in my den, I can't seem to shake the thought. Instead, I stare at the top of the den, listening to the soft breath of the other warriors and trying to find a way around the impossible, terrible thought that's begun to burrow into my brain like a worm. Despite my best efforts and my intense drowsiness, I barely get any sleep that night.

Aging

There are so many small details about old DragonClan that I begin to notice as time crawls on. It's always slightly warmer here, despite being further to the north. The colors are seemingly warmer as well, as if someone tinted the entire world with sunlight. Perhaps it's a side effect of them being little more than memories, a way of cutting our worlds apart. A way of making this alternative look *better*. Another thing I've begun to notice is that if you know something that no one else does, something that could destroy life as they know it, even your loved ones will shrug it off. After all, the only thing more terrifying than you being crazy as a fox is even considering you might be right.

It's been almost a moon since I was here, and a moon seems to have passed without me. I woke up in the morning to the scent of herbs and knew I was hom- I mean here.

Here again.

As I stand up, Pyrewing's tail brushes mine. He's already in the den, rubbing gently against me. "It's the big day."

I purr as if I know what he's talking about. "Are you excited?"

"Of course. He's already out there."

He means Brownkit. If Brownkit is out there... and it's been a moon...

"Do you think he's ready to become an apprentice?" I ask, anxiety in my mew.

Pyrewing licks me gently. "He'll be fine."

I sigh. "Of course he will. I'm sorry." He helps me up as Infernotail glares at us both from the back of the den, and we walk together to cluster around the Hightree. Sure enough, Brownkit paces below it, fur fluffed out like some great caterpillar.

Questions buzz in my mind like bees as the other warriors close in around us and I lose sight of Brownkit in the crowd. Their very presence makes me anxious. There are so many cats I've either forgotten or never learned much about to begin with.

"Hello, Ashleap! How are you this morning?" asks a bright golden she-cat. She looks like Goldenfire, but has the energy of Maplepaw or Cherrypaw. *What was your name again?*

Another dark furred tom leers at me before padding to find a new place below the Highfall- no, it's the Hightree here! *Who is that? Why can't I remember ever fighting him? Why does he look so angry?*

For StarClan's sake, what was that one herb for headaches?

Focus, Ashleap, focus! Your son is becoming an apprentice today!

Rushcall might never have kits, not even with Novablaze, but here in this world, I get to be a mother, even if I'm just an adopted one. As Brownkit steps forward to stand below Featherstar, who's sizing him from her perch on the Hightree, I feel a rush of anxiety flood me.

"Brownkit, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Brownpaw. I will mentor you myself. Hopefully I will learn as much as you will learn from me in our moons together."

"Brownpaw! Brownpaw! Brownpaw!"

I exhale deeply. Thank StarClan he got a good mentor. Better yet, a great mentor! He must feel anxious as I did.

I take it back as I watch him race up, practically scrambling up the tree before Featherstar jumps down anyways. He races up to her to touch noses and headbutts her. She turns to the clan with a purr. "Quite the enthusiastic one."

The clan echoes their amusement before slowly dispersing, returning to their early morning activities. The dawn patrol is already out and the rest of the clan is taking a quick bite and sharing tongues.

Pyrewing disappears into the crowd, only to return with Brownpaw, who practically bounces off the walls with delight. "Did you hear that?!"

"Oh, I did." Pyrewing purrs. "We all heard, didn't we, Ashleap?"

I crouch to his level, which is no longer hard as it used to be. It's a bittersweet reminder Brownpaw is growing up.

"You don't have to do that," he says with an air of subtle resentment.

"Do what?" I ask.

"Lean down. I'm nearly as tall as you are."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. Ashleap's still taller than me, even though I'm older."

"Oh, don't worry. Pyrewing might be small, but he makes up for it in spirit."

"Plenty of that to go around." Pyrewing purrs. "Then again, besides height, there's also muscle. I've met cats smaller than I am with twice the muscle. No one wants to mess with them!"

"Really?" asks Brownpaw. "Like who?"

"That one ForestClan warrior..." Pyrewing stops to puzzle over this. "Shorttail, was it? He gave me one of the longest scars down my flank! That one may never heal."

"Shorttail? Now I know you're making things up." I say. "There's no one who would name their kit Shortkit."

"I've definitely heard odder prefixes."

"If you say so. That's not important anyways. This is Brownpaw's big day." I purr. "So. What do you have planned?"

"Featherstar hasn't told me anything." Brownpaw admits. "Do you think she's waiting for me now?"

"She might be. Wait, before you go-" I stare at Brownpaw intently, my tail straight and stiff. "Make sure that Featherstar gives you time to breathe. Make friends. Don't let your warrior training prevent you from being part of the clan."

"Okay!" he says, prancing off to meet Featherstar.

"I can't believe we've gotten away with all of this." says Pyrewing, incredulous. "A medicine cat and the deputy, raising a kit together."

"Neither can I. I think Featherstar let us slide because we've been doing our duties."

"There's definitely some personal bias in there too. She trusts your decisions more than anyone's."

"You think so?"

"Of course! You've been there for most of her leadership. You're her rock. Dependable. Honest." Coyly, he adds, "Beautiful."
"Are you sure we're still talking about rocks?" I tease.

"Precious minerals, perhaps."

I give Pyrewing a greatly elongated eye roll. "You should get going." I tell him. "You're deputy. You need to be making patrols, or you might find that Featherstar isn't half as lenient as we previously thought."

With a smirk, he passes by me towards the remaining cats in camp, running his tail carefully under my nose. His scent hits the top of my mouth, painfully real.

I turn towards the forest where Brownpaw left. My heart still beats a little faster knowing he's out there, even under Featherstar's guidance. Should I follow him? Perhaps I could tell Infernotail about some herbs near the training hollow. Do they *use* the training hollow here?

Before I can ask myself any more questions, bright white light begins to speckle in my eyes. I fall to the ground, my head burning, and pain sears through my ears as noise floods them. With a yowl of

pain, the world turns to pure light and then to nothingness.

***

"All cats to the Highfall for a clan meeting!"

My eyes shoot open and my paws flail in every direction, hitting the sides of my nest and another late sleeper next to me. My breath is quick and uneasy and my ears are still burning.

My ears fall to my sides as I realize I'm awake. I had so many plans for the day, too... I shake my head. It doesn't matter. I can't get that attached again. I apologize to Duststorm, who grumbles softly in his nest.

"I didn't mean to wake you up." I say quietly. "I'm very sorry."

"That's what they all say. I'll be moving my nest tonight." Duststorm replies.

"Sorry." I hang my head.

"Just go on. They need you at Highfall."

Not wanting to question him further, despite his lack of interest in the clan gathering, I rush away towards the Highfall, where the rest of the clan is already sharing tongues in relative silence as Novaflare calls out the patrols for the day.

"You just missed the patrols." Goldenfire informs me as Sparrowsong licks her back. She nudges Sparrowsong. "Alright, my turn."

Sparrowsong purrs. "Good morning. Sleeping in?"

"I suppose so." I tell them, uneasy. "Did they say what patrol I'm in?"

"No, actually." Sparrowsong mews. "I looked out for you too. Do you think something's up?"

"It always is." I reply.

Over us, Knottedstar stands next to Novaflare. "Rushcall, I would like to speak to you. Please meet me near the south edge of camp."

"That explains it." I say, still staring skyward.

"What did you do now?" asks Thistleheart, exasperated.

"Nothing, I swear!" I back up a few steps. My heart pumps in my chest. "Really!"

"Alright, alright." Goldenfire jumps over Sparrowsong and stands between Thistleheart and I. "I'm sure it's nothing too important. If it is..." her eyes narrow to slits as she turns to me. "You tell us."

"Of course." I say before walking off.

The bees have returned to my brain in full force, but I stagger towards the southern edge of camp anyways. In typical Knottedstar fashion, the leader is there long before I am. She turns around and mutters, "I remember when I first saw you train, Rushcall You were so young... yet somehow, you held so much promise, even then. You were nothing like I was as an apprentice."

"Really?" I ask. It's hard imagining Knottedstar as a younger cat. Many of her characteristics (her biting wit, sharp claws, and powerful voice) clearly come from continuous sharpening over the ages. Without that, who could she have been before? I can't imagine her as a gossip like Hazelwhisker or Rubyshine, nor have I seen her with any sort of group resembling what my kin have.

"Really." As if she was reading my mind, she continues, "I didn't have many friends as an apprentice. I was born in a time of many kits, much like you were, but many of them were very weak. Few made it to adulthood. As an often sickly or quiet kit, I learned that there were better ways of fighting than with my claws. The leader at the time, Crabstar, did not appreciate my sense of humor..." The edges of her mouth twist upwards fondly. "... but he respected it. We had a strange relationship, him and I."

"Really? You talked back to the leader as a kit?" I say, shocked.

"Didn't you?" she responds.

My ears flatten with embarassment. "No, Lunarshine talked back to the leader. If she wasn't so impulsive, I never would have done anything like it."

"Lunarshine is part of you." Knottedstar says firmly. "This doesn't mean you share her crimes, but it does mean you're prone to some of her characteristics. Her determination. Her ambition. Her passion."

"Those don't all sound that bad." I mew, perplexed.

"No trait is truly good or evil. Even things mundane as kindness can be twisted and perverted, and even a blazing ambition like hers can be used properly." Her eyes narrow. "I never told you why I wanted to mentor you, did I?"

I shake my head. "You never mentioned it. Is it something I should know?" When I don't get her answer, I ask, "Wait, why did you ask me here exactly? I think we got a little carried away."

"This was why." she answers simply. "I only wanted to speak with you. As for why I made you my apprentice... Lunarshine and Ashleap, originally. I looked up to them both. I revered them. I imagined that they (or some of the other StarClan cats I had heard of) would come and give me some great prophecy. I gave up eventually and learned to work on my own, but some part of me always hoped that I would speak with the greats someday. As soon as I knew that you were them, I thought that this was my chance. I would finally meet my idols. Repay them for the hope they gave me, perhaps. Yet... I didn't end up learning to love either of them. Like the leader who once raised me, I was floored by the pure might of a single kit, although she was a child of actions and words instead of only the latter. That kit wasn't Ashleap nor Lunarshine. That kit was you, Rushcall."

I grow warm from the compliment. "Thank you."

She nods respectfully. "These old bones are going to give out if I don't get my rest." she says almost bitterly. "Head on a border patrol without me. They haven't quite left yet."

"Are you sure? Do you want to come, too?"

"No. I have some things to think over. Decisions to make."

I turn to go, hastily padding after a small cluster of cats that includes my brother, Sparrowsong.

"I'm sorry." Knottedstar mutters, as if she had held in the words for a long time. "I never should have sent you apprentices into the tunnels. I had no idea they'd grown so dangerous."

"Weren't they always like that?" I ask.

"No." Knottedstar says. "Now that we have no tunnelkeeper, they're only going to get worse."

Birdsong

I wanted to tell him the truth, but I showed him the waterfall instead.

"What in StarClan is this?!" Pyrewing exclaims with delight, staring up at the Highfall as if it was the second coming of Dragonstar.

"It's a waterfall." I tell him. "Does it seem familiar to you?"

"I've never really been this far south." he admits. "No one comes down here. Doesn't some other clan supposedly live down here?"

"Do they?" I ask, grateful that he doesn't know either. Just the other day, I accidentally slipped up and had to make up some story about the last leader to some kit I don't know. (Hopefully they don't tell anyone.)
"Who knows? I don't smell anything." he cackles. "Not like we'd care anyways! DragonClan can defend against the majority of the clans in the forest. You do know most clans have fifteen or less cats, right?"

"I don't hear very much about them." I say, which is true as I've heard basically nothing. "Have any of them tried to attack us?"

"None of the ones that are still around." he says grimly. Noticing my disgust at this, he adds, "Hey! We had our last war seasons and seasons ago. I know you don't care much for history, but you might want to think about it. It might help you identify the cats in your visions."

"I suppose so. Why don't you tell me some history, then?"

"Once upon a time, long, long ago," He stresses the long almost comedically, punctuating it with a teasing nudge, "The clans used to gather in order to discuss their problems both within their clans and with each other every six moons. However, due to the nature of clans around here, which clans showed up to the gatherings were

completely random and rarely would you have so much as the major clans together in the same clearing. Since the definition of 'clan' is so loose, dozens of small groups of cats supposedly given their blessing by StarClan would come in claiming to sit with the grand groups like ours and ForestClan or WindClan's. Eventually, those small groups grew hostile and the large groups grew bitter over having to listen to the problems of 'clans' that would disperse before the next gathering. After a while, they simply stopped happening. Luckily, due to the size of the forest and our might, we don't have to worry about anyone else."

"I see." I say. The idea is intriguing. How often have I wanted to see cats of another clan, to meet them, to brush pelts? Not often, I admit, but now that it's been brought up... do they have prophecy cats too? Do they have restless spirits screaming soundlessly beneath the earth?

The idea of not being alone anymore is terrifying but reassuring.

He purrs. "Our past lives probably attended them regularly. A part of us still here, a part of us with StarClan, and a part of us in the earth, right? That's what you told me."

I nod. "Once we're dead."

The stars shine over us both as we sit in silence. Pyrewing mulls over my words, lifting his head up slightly and squinting as he always does after I tell him about things like these. He reminds me so much of Novablaze, back when we were kits only playing at being deep and mysterious.

Around us, the world is the same as it always is. The river roars as it does every day when I'm awake, and I swear that if I turn around I'll see the clan settling in for the night. It's almost uncanny how little this place has changed, save for the dens.

"Ashleap." he says, so sternly that it makes all my fur stand on end. I turn to meet his gaze, but he answers before I can open my mouth. "No matter where we are. Whatever world, whatever time, whether we're in the earth or a million miles away from here... I'll never stop loving you."

"I'll never stop looking." I promise without hesitation.

His eyes are luminous as stars, yet they carry no warmth. I find myself silent before them, yet they're so strikingly familiar.

I think I've already found you, my love...

***

I resolve to find him in the morning, but as usual I manage to wake up late and the clan is already gathering below the Highfall. Irritated, I pace towards the Highfall and sit down on the rocks where Pyrewing and I sat the night before. Just doing so makes my fur puff up all over again. I try to resist purring, bordered by Carbonfrost and several other senior warriors. They hardly notice as I sneak in behind them.

"Rushcall, Sparrowsong, and Rubyshine will form the third hunting party for today. Remember, if you see anything in the woods, call out for help and do not enter the tunnels for any reason. We have several patrols covering them up for the time being, until the danger has passed and we receive an omen about our new tunnelkeeper." Novablaze finishes. "You are free to begin your patrols."

I notice my brother from a ways off. He's with the others as usual, talking with Goldenfire. I wedge my way between Thistleheart and Sparrowsong. "Are you ready?"

His eyes widen. "Oh. Yes... we should get going. Later, Goldenfire?"

I notice Novablaze coming down over the ridge. "On second thought... can you meet me in a bit? I'd like to talk with Novablaze."

"I'll find Rubyshine. Meet you by the hickory tree at the edge of camp." he says.

"He seemed dejected." I say.

"Probably because he had to leave his mate." Thistleheart sighs.

"What? My brother has a mate?" I ask.

"Does everything always fly right over your head, Rushcall? My sister. Your brother. Both of them are clearly madly in love."
"No they aren't!" Sharpfoot hisses. "Sparrowsong has standards. He'll find someone more refined."

"Like you?" Thistleheart teases. "Sure, sure. You wouldn't know 'refined' if it was dangled in front of your nose."

"You mousebrain, take that back!" Sharpfoot jumps on top of Thistleheart like an angry squirrel and the tom thrashes wildly, clearly having a good time.

"This isn't time to be bickering like kits." I tell them both. Looking up, I see that Novablaze is already gone. I hiss, knowing I'll have to speak with him later instead. I sit down by the hickory tree to find only Sparrowsong there.

"Rubyshine's still gossiping with Hazelwhisker, isn't she?"

He nods.

"So... you and Goldenfire?" I say, sitting down beside him.

"What does she sound like?" I ask.

"She sounds like... the river." he says.

"Really?" I ask. "Usually, they sound like birdsong, right?"

"No!" he says. "Not just the river. The first birds you hear in the morning. The last thing you hear before falling asleep. The sound of the clan resting together, the gentle harmony that comes with that. She sounds like the waterfall, like the cry of a mourning dove, like rain- a million different things and none of them should sound right together but all of them do."

"I have no idea how your power works." I tell him. "I can only imagine what that must be like."

He shakes his head. "I can't describe it, I'm sorry. That was the best I could do."

"It's fine." I tell him, and Rubyshine finally appears. Both of us stand up instantly, prompting a curious glance from Rubyshine, but being an older warrior she doesn't care much for anything we do anyways. She takes the lead and we walk into the forest together, bright leaves crunching below our paws.

In spite of myself, I keep glancing at Sparrowsong's ears, which are angled to catch what I can only assume is my song as well as Rubyshine's.

I wonder what Pyrewing sounds like.

I wonder if songs are the sames across lives.

I realize quickly that I'm jealous of my brother.

***

If there's one thing I've learned about DragonClan, it's that if you're ever woken up in the middle of the night, it's because something nearby is about to murder you and you should hide far away as possible.

Unfortunately, I'm very bad at hiding and the danger is always me or someone who hates me.

This time, when the fox comes with open jaws, I stand up first. Curious gold eyes watch me stagger upwards, and then he retreats like the coward he is.

"Not this time!" I hiss under my breath. Leaping over Novablaze's still body, I race into the woods, disappearing with a *swoosh* of foliage against my body as I jump through the bushes near the edge of camp. Following the half-lit cat in the moonlit, I race into a tunnel after him like a fox pursuing a hare.

Who's the predator now?

When I emerge in one of the many large clearings in the darkness, he rounds on me. I can smell his foul breath as he circles me. He's been living off of crowfood.

Fitting for a fox, I suppose.

"What did he say when you told him?" he asks.

"I didn't." I admit. Lately, Novablaze had been elusive. There would be a time, but it would not be now.

Soon.

Yeah, right.

He shakes his head. "You're wasting your time, Rushcall. Novablaze will never love you the way you love him. Then again, you practically stare through him, don't you? What kind of love is that?"

"I know a lot more about love than you do." I hiss. "My job's already done. In the morning, we'll be able to track your scent and the clan will put an end to you." It's a bluff, it's likely he's covered himself well, but I'll take anything to keep him on his guard.

"That'd be a mercy." he says. "Not like there's anything worth it here."

"What about the clan? What about loyalty? Love? Does any of that mean anything to you?" I ask angrily, careful to keep my voice down. I know that he may not be the only one listening down here.

"They're all just words after a while. Words with no meaning behind them are pointless, hollow, ugly things... like bird bones."

The word *bird* hits a nerve. I don't reply and he seizes upon me.

"You're thinking about your brother, aren't you?" he says tauntingly. "How's dear old Sparrowpaw doing anyways?"

"We aren't apprentices anymore." I tell him. "Unlike you."

"I'm Jetstreak now." he tells me. "King of the foxes."

"You definitely have the heart of one, traitor."

"They sent me down here. I was bait down here. That's why

Knottedstar hasn't appointed a new tunnelkeeper. Learned from her mistake." His crooked grin shines in the darkness. "Who cares that there's still a cat living down here, half dead? In the depths of the tunnels, no one can hear you scream. You can cry out for mercy and no one will ever come." He advances on me slowly, and I back up the tunnels.

He begins running and I turn around to bolt. The entrance is gone, so I race down another tunnel, breathing heavily. Limbs press against mine and I resist the urge to begin retching. Breaking their grip, I dig desperately upwards in a small, pathetic tunnel, my lungs crying out for open air. Something seizes on my tail and the fox has me, and I pull away the last layer of dirt to see Pyrewing standing in the moonlight, eyes blank and cold.

I slam into Novablaze as I wake up, and he groans in his sleep.

Just a dream.

My tail stings. I turn around to see it, noticing blood on my nest where my tail was before. There are bitemarks there- the teeth of a fox.

Heat

"I dare you to keep up!" Scorchclaw yowls into the wind, his short fur rippling furiously as the breeze passes over it. His ears are flat behind him as he lowers his head into the run and the ruby sunset dyes his fur a shocking red. By his side, Sharpfoot bounds along, eager to please him. Her long, dark fur bounces up and down as she tries to keep his stride, making a show of every swift step.

The smell of pine on my tongue is replaced by the warm aroma of sun kissed fall leaves as I follow behind them, breathing heavily. Every breath is shorter and finds me further behind, the trees tripping me up and scattering my steps as I flail gracefully through the forest. Even though I don't share half their enthusiasm for pointless racing, I'm definitely keen on reaching camp around the same time as them.

The forest is not a hospitable place after dark.

"All of you are so immature." Emberstreak is almost invisible, disappearing into the woods behind us. The fourth member of our border patrol takes her sweet time strolling along, leaves sticking to her long fur and cluttering her pelt. Frustrated, I give up my chase and slow down to almost a walk, and in due time Emberstreak catches up.

"Sometimes I wonder how Scorchclaw is older than you or your littermate," scolds Emberstreak. "Both of you might be a bit odd, but you at least have something inside your brain besides hairballs."

"That's a bit harsh." I say absentmindedly, staring up at the canopy instead of straight at her. The sun is definitely setting now. The sky has turned a brilliant violet and the trees reflect the light of the dying sun. Since we've passed the hill behind which it sets, everything is darkening quickly.

"By the starry pelts of our ancestors, you'd think-"

A wail of distress rips through the air like a claw to my heart. Birds fly away above us and Scorchclaw and Sharpfoot stop dead in their tracks.

"What's that?" I ask, every fur on my back standing straight up.

"It can't be time already." Emberstreak says.

"It's Hazelwhisker!" cries Scorchclaw, "She's kitting *right now*!" He breaks into a dead sprint, dodging familiar trees as we near the camp.

"She's what?!" I call, suddenly running along in an attempt not to be left behind.

"You didn't know Hazelwhisker was due for kits soon?" asks Sharpfoot, her mew condescending.

"I didn't know they were mates!" I spit back, barely able to speak between rapid inhales.
"Rushcall, you need to get your head out of the clouds or one of these days you're going to fall straight out of the sky." she teases, hardly feeling the stress of the run at all as we leap through the bushes surrounding camp and come out on the other side.

Another cry sends Scorchclaw ramming into the other cats, yowling, "Let me through!" at the top of his lungs. I collapse into camp, exhausted, my chest heaving up and down like they're the last breaths I'll ever take.

Sharpfoot pushes me over before going on her way to the warriors den. Sometimes I wonder how she can be so pointlessly cruel, usually to the point of being petty. If there's ever been a shred of anything but bitterness in her heart, she hasn't shown it to me, that's for certain.

Then again...

I get to my paws, still breathing heavily as I walk towards the medicine den. I edge my way past several cats and poke my head out near the front of the crowd. Sharpfoot emerges by my side, and I can see Scorchclaw's ginger pelt next to his mate's as she bites

down on a stick, which is beginning to break beneath her firm grip. With another anguished cry, another kit slides out onto the ground. Hazelwhisker bites the birth sac and begins licking the kitten furiously, though it looks more like a gray rat than a cat at this point. Its fur is short and moist, but Hazelwhisker lovingly places it by its sibling and it immediately begins to suckle.

"A she-cat and a tom. They're beautiful." purrs Tinyblossom. "You've done very well."

Hazelwhisker nods weakly, her attention still focused at the small kits by her side.

"What will you call them?" Scorchclaw asks.

"What will *we* call them," she corrects, "I like Purekit for the she-cat."

"That leaves me to name the tom. He has your fur," he adds. "He's beautiful. They both are. They're like a light in our new life..." "Flashkit!" Hazelwhisker says.

"Perfect." Scorchclaw agreeds. "Purekit and Flashkit."

Tinyblossom looks up at us and hisses, "Alright, that's enough! Go to sleep, share tongues, I don't care, but you need to leave the new family and I alone."

She looks at me shrewdly. "I'll deal with you later, Rushcall. I can see those scars on your tail." As the others leave, I get to my own paws and look around. A certain face is notably missing from the crowd. Easing my way out of the medicine den, I see him standing by the waterfall, his fur blowing gently in the breeze off the waterfall.

The starlight is bitterly cold on my pelt and the spray off the water chills me internally as I sit down beside him, cool rock against my fur. "You weren't there for the kitting." I tell him.

"Hazelwhisker needs her space. Do you need something?"

"I've been trying to talk to you for a while now." I tell him

anxiously. "There's some important things I'd like to say."

"Have you ever considered how much of our life has already passed?" Novablaze asks me, though he doesn't even look my way. "Some of the most tender parts of our life have gone by like that and we hardly looked up long enough to notice."

"I suppose so." I say quietly.

"Makes you put things into perspective." he says bluntly.

"Y-yes, but that doesn't have anything to do with what I-"

He cuts me off. "Rushcall, have you ever wanted to have kits?"

I close my mouth and just nod curtly.

"I was curious. You know, sometimes, when I look at you... it almost feels like I'm home. It reminds me of something, but I'm never quite sure what. I just know... something deep in my soul is calling out for you."

"That's why I wanted to talk to you." I say. "This may sound strange, but I feel the same way. Do you think it's fate?"

"I have no idea what it is. It's confusing and slightly terrifying." He turns to me for the first time in the conversation. "I have the same dream almost every night as well, ever since we went into the tunnels. It's unlike anything I've ever seen before, but I didn't want to consult the medicine cat about it. Too personal."

"You can tell me."

"If we're in this together, I don't have much of a choice." he mews halfheartedly. "It starts and ends with you, although I can never make out your face. Your fur seems to change in color as I speak to you, a spectrum of grays, silvers, browns, and golds. Despite that, I can always tell it's you because your eyes are golden. You whisper something into my ears and then bolt down the path, and I run to follow. Almost immediately, I lose sight of you and begin to look around. The entire area smells like rot and decay, and though it's almost impossible to make anything else, the best I can describe it

as is a forest where the trees are made of shadow. There are voices echoing all around me, like those in the tunnel.

They call from all angles:

'Are you tired, brother?'

'Lay down and stay awhile.'

'Blood this old deserves to rest.'

I ignore them and keep running, only to find that I'm a few seconds too late and I watch as a fox the color of pitch bites your throat open and disappears into the darkness.

Your blood falls dark scarlet on my paws and you call for me, but you never get my name right. You've called me a million things, but the only one I can remember... 'Pyrewing'. The forest goes dark around you and then I wake up."

He's no storyteller, that's for certain, but my fur is still sticking straight up as if I've been in the tunnels for an extended period of time.

"Pyrewing. He was an ancient cat." I tell him. "Ashleap's... mate."

"One of your spirits?" he inquires.

I nod again, my fur still spiking up in sheer terror.

"That would make us destined to be mates, wouldn't it?"

"We choose our own destiny," I say, if only for my own benefit.

"True. Whatever we had was the dream of two foolhardy kits long, long ago. No ancient cats are going to change the path our paws have taken now."

"Whatever it was or wasn't," I tell him. "I think we both... need some time." I get to my paws, gazing deep into his deep, dark eyes. They look almost like Pyrewing's, if Pyrewing's eyes were cloaked in shadow and never let shine again. The hauntingly familiar eyes

glare back into mine with the intensity of the Highfall itself.

"You said that last time." he says as his haunches slide back and he gets to his own paws, hardly breaking eye contact for a second. "Before we go, may I ask you one question?"

"Anything." I breathe, barely hesitating.

"Are you looking at me, or are you looking past me?" he asks.

"What?" I ask, taken aback.

"You knew my past lives. I've worked out that much." he lowers his head, edging in a little closer so we're almost touching.

"I do." I affirm. "Whatever you're trying to accuse me of, I can assure you it's completely unfounded."

"Whoever he- they are," Pyrewing- no! Novablaze hisses, "I'm not them."

With that, he gets up and walks away, leaving me alone by the waterfall in the moonlight.

((OH BOY IT'S BACK!
If you really want a scope of how bad my writer's block was, I actually worked on this chapter every day without an update. I could only write about 200 words a day because I was just so uninspired. I am very, very sorry for the delay and any subsequent ones that may come from... the dreaded midterm season. Many of my teachers have cancelled their tests but I'm still going to be playing catch up because of recent snow days. Please bear with me...))

Blizzard

Brownpaw is wrestling with Tidepaw when I catch him in the clearing. He hardly acknowledges my presence, though I expected no validation to begin with. Just seeing him pressing his adversary into the ground is reward enough for stopping near the training hollow.

I sniff the air and its familiar scents flood me like old friends. I know the dusty interior and the trees clustering around it well. It's far to the north of the new DragonClan camp and far to the south of the old one.

I sit down by an oak tree, pressing my face against bark that is now grown over with scars. The autumn leaves at my paws are just as brown and crackly as they are back home. I step on one, kitlike in my joy.

In the clearing, a head turns. It's Redshadow, one of the clans' newest warriors. The ambitious tom sizes me up from the forest, every muscle taut. "Shouldn't you be busy?"

I glare back reproachfully. "You have no right to judge if I'm occupying myself or not. Oak bark is useful for casts. I need it for Infernotail's cast." The blatant lie is almost hysterically transparent, but few cats pay much attention to what I do anyways. Expecting Redshadow to have any idea what I'm talking about, much less respect it, is like sitting by the river and expecting the fish to grow legs.

"I thought you used maple." pipes up Brownpaw from the clearing, blissfully unaware of my plight.

"I mix it up on occasion." I tell him. "The maple bark isn't working for him lately, so I thought I'd bring in something new to appease him."

"That's so considerate of you, mo- I mean Ashleap! I'll ask him how

it works!" Brownpaw says cheerfully.

Not only did he almost call me 'mother', he's going to give me away.

He called me 'mother'.

I'm his mother.

Feeling my fur grow hot, I turn to leave, oak bark swaddled in a particularly large leaf, I hear Redshadow call after me. "There are rogues in the territory again. Be careful, alright?"

I turn back. Something about the voice is irritatingly familiar.

I know that face.

***

They loved him. The other cats in the clan would speak constantly of his bright future, as if Lightpaw was truly that- a light that blocked out all others, a cat so bright he could change the world merely by existing and doing little else.

"Have you seen him hunt?"

"What a fighter?"

"Those are the scars of a warrior."

Written on the tunnels were remarks that spoke otherwise. The darkness spoke of rival clans that had fallen long ago, their bones left to litter the tunnels. That was why DragonClan's territory was so luxuriously large, after all. The darkness had seen cats like Lightpaw rush into battle with claws sharpened and a triumphant yowl, unsure what they were fighting for but sure that they were meant to fight.

When he was grown enough to lust for more than a quick rush of adrenaline, Lightheart came to her. He was entranced by darkness.

She loathed him.

Her clanmates were blind, as usual.

They did not know where he went when he snuck out of camp. They did not know that the rogues in the forest were often scared loners or kittypets. They did not know of the bodies hastily shoved in the tunnels.

Flowers withered beneath his paws. He would crush them just for fun.

It is one thing, perhaps, to hurt things that can hurt you back. You can kill a fox in self defense. You can attack a cat if they attack you.

Lightheart was different. He struck first. He did not understand the karma of the universe in the way she did.

Then again, she rarely talked to her clanmates, so not much was coming around, good or otherwise.

One day, Lightheart stepped on a ribcage in the tunnels and did not apologize. He did not understand why the flowers were more than flowers, nor why the body was more than old bones. He came to Lunarshine after committing this crime and asked for her help.

"They are coming for me," he said. "They would not leave and now they wish to attack us. Bring the clan into the tunnels. Teach them to fight here. End the rogues. Save the clan."

Lunarshine was going to save the clan.

I am going to save all of them.

The moon will never touch the body, nor the sun. It is hidden deep in the tunnels where no one will ever find it.

"The rogues got him," said the clan.

"What a loss."

"We'll need to strike back."

In death, Lightheart killed every rogue in the forest.

The next time someone was cruel, they were fed to the rogues. The innocent dead were just as cruel as the guilty.

Is this how he felt?
Did he think his cause was just?

***

I wake directly from the flashback, my head still burning, and stare out of the warrior's den. Something is warm against my pelt. I look over to find Novablaze lying next to me. He's twitching in his sleep, his leg kicking out to hit my side. The breath of my clanmates is fogging the air, clearly warming the inside of the den far more than usual.

Padding outside, I find that there's snow on the ground with more on the way. The downy flakes fly about me like butterflies, stopping on my nose before quivering and fading away altogether. Something about the briefness of their lifespans is oddly terrifying.

With a shiver, I step further into the cold, feeling the snow crunch beneath my pads. It's oddly satisfying, though I find myself picking up the pace due to how quickly my pads become raw from the temperature. As I make my way to the Highfall, I notice just how few cats are there. Goldenfire and Sparrowheart are sitting with their tails twined, muttering sickingly sweet things to each other.

I look away, half out of envy, half out of respect for their privacy, and turn to Hazelwhisker's kits, who are racing around the clearing at top speed, bowling into warriors left and right. Out of the two of them, Flashkit is the troublemaker, mainly due to his sisters' shortcomings. Purekit stumbles behind her brother in the snow, sniffing the air to see where he's going.

Ever since birth, she's been completely blind.

I feel a stab of pity for the wandering kit in the snow, pulled along by her hyperactive brother, but I'm called back by Novablaze's voice.

"Rushcall, Carbonfrost, and Cherryshine, you will be patrolling the

ForestClan border."

"We should head out then." Carbonfrost says. He walks past me across the river, barely noticing how wet his paws have become.

"You shouldn't pull stunts like that. It's practically leaf-bare," I scold Carbonfrost. He barely notices my plea, trekking on through the snow as I follow behind, ears flattened. Cherryshine bounces along behind me, quickly dashing in front as I trudge along. My pads are already sore and we've barely started walking!

The snow begins to fall faster around us as we pace along the scent lines, digging beneath the snow to lay our scent there. I spy no warriors over the border, a good sign, though it's worrying that we might be the only ones out there. I mark another border and turn to see Carbonfrost and Cherryshine are already a ways off.

"Wait up!" I call, but they don't turn around.

Frustrated, I begin running, but with an angry howl snow blows faster and I lose sight of them. It's well up over my paws now and I'm absolutely freezing. I look up and snow burns in my eyes. It's coming down incredibly fast now, far faster than anything we received last leafbare.

"Hello?" I call, trudging through the white emptiness, a place where the trees have parted and the only sound is the falling snow, which sounds at once like nothing but somehow manages to block out all other sound without trying.

The infinite silence has swallowed me whole.

Panic begins to rise within me. Something thrashes in my insides, making me feel sick.

Suddenly, a violent headache threatens to break my head open, a single voice calling to me as the world blurs away...

***

It snowed like this once and you held him in the cold and he kept you warm.

***

Lunarshine?

Not now, not now, not now. I can't be trapped like this. Carbonfrost and Cherryshine are coming back for me.

I lurch to the side as if hit, my head falling against the snow, which is surprisingly painful. Have I hit my head against a rock buried beneath the fresh drifts?

I try to get up and fall to the other side. Within my own head, I can hear distressed wailing. I try to scramble up, but some invisible force holds me down.

***

You'll learn to love me more than him. I am the moon and you are the sun.

***

It's definitely Lunarshine, and she sounds desperate. Dots begin to speckle my vision, a sure sign that nothing good can come of whatever's currently happening. The war in my head makes my heart pulse faster as my paws begin to go numb. My breath speeds up, then slows, then quickens again.

***

Fire and light are in love with each other. That's why when there is fire, there will always be light. The light comes to the fire, curves around it, gives it meaning.

***

Ashleap.

I can hear yelling in the distance. Someone is calling for me.

***

Once, long ago, there was a fire and a light who met in the dead of the darkness. They were so close that it was hard to tell that they were not, indeed, one and the same. Together, they grew so powerful that the darkness trembled before them. They grew so bright that they outshone the stars, and all of the world fell before them, and all the cats and all the creatures of the earth grew to need them. The stars, knowing they could not outshine the darkness themselves, and secretly jealous of this great light, plucked them up into the sky, where they became the sun, illuminating the entire day by themselves.

There are many other times the two met beneath the same sun, their new forms a pale copy of the light they had once created together.

From then on, whenever they met, no matter what world, they were fated to fall in love.

No matter what happened, one of them was fated to die.

***

Pyrewing is calling my name. I can feel him trying to nudge me awake, but I'm curled up in the snow like prey in the last stages of its life and there is no saving me now. I can feel him against me like fire. Ashleap's story burns at the back of my mind.

It's true. Every last word is true but the sun is gone behind the clouds now.

***

Ashleap.

***

I am Infernoleap, but all of my legs are numb and near breaking. They are ice. If anyone steps on them they will shatter.

They're yelling at him. He never wanted to be a medicine cat.

***

What?

***

No. That's real yelling. In my abandoned physical body, my frostbitten ears catch a sound from far away. There's warriors trudging back through the snow.

***

None of this matters anymore.

There's no more time.

There's only one more leafbare and then it's over.

We may not even survive this one.

***

Pyrewing is shaking me awake. I can feel the warmth of two warriors and his own, which is nothing but pure, beautiful fire.

"Rushcall!" cries Carbonfrost. I don't even open my eyes. "My daughter, please..."

"Don't mourn for her. You're the one who left her to die."

"She walked off on her own. Do you have any idea how far we are into ForestClan territory?!"

I am colder than ice and now I'm melting. I can feel my body dripping away, my fur covered in flakes that make it stick up, frozen...

"Where did you last post a scent?"
"Almost six treelengths from here. When we noticed she had fallen behind, we went back for her and she was gone. We thought she might have gone back to camp, so we ran back-"

"You harebrained fool."

***

There will always be time for stories.

***

There's a light in the distance. Unfazed, I stare straight into the sun.

My whole body is immersed in warmth and then, there's nothing but darkness.

Home

It's greenleaf again. The warmth is almost smothering, and I'm in the medicine den with suntouched herbs wafting into my nose. Their combined scent is almost overpowering, to the point to where my eyes begin to water just sitting there, so close I could almost taste them if I stuck my tongue out.

I'm about to get to my paws when he tackles me, the two of us rolling over until I'm on my back against the wall of the medicine den. I stare up into his excited eyes and nudge him with one paw, drawing his face away from mine. "Nice to see you, you silly tom."

"Well, well, well. It's nice to see you too, Ashleap."

My ears twitch as he says my name, drawing it out for a painfully long time. Something about it feels unfamiliar. I shake my head, pushing him off and getting to my paws. My legs shake uncontrollably of their own accord, as if trembling in fear of some greater power.

"Is something wrong?" he asks.

"No." I say firmly, though my whole body feels like I'm on the brink of collapse. "I'm fine."

"In that case..." Pyrewing purrs. "Meet me over by the Highfall. Brownfur should be finishing his vigil any moment."

I nod. "I'll be right there." As he walks away, I stride to the fresh-kill pile and sink my teeth into a rabbit. It's repugnantly juicy, the taste so intense that it makes me spit it out. "Ugh!"

I look around, trying to find somewhere to wipe the taste from my mouth, and instinctively turn to the left.

There's nothing there but more trees, making me feel foolish. What was I looking for, exactly?

Instead, I catch Infernoleap's eyes, meeting his glower with confusion. Though he's usually crabby, today he looks downright angry. *Is something bothering him?*

"Are you alright?" I ask, my voice flat and uninterested as I walk towards him and sit down again.

He hisses, turning his back to me. "You don't understand how lucky you are."

"What? Is this about Brownfur? Pyrewing? Infernoleap, for the last time, you're part of my family too and-"

"Oh, we know that's not true."

"What?"

"I'm an outcast in my own clan. Sometimes I just want to run away and-" For a second, one perfect breath, his fur is black instead of red and his eyes are a familiar gold. He looks almost foxlike.

"I recognize you." I say.

He opens his mouth to reveal fox teeth. "You have to get out."

"Ashleap!" Pyrewing calls my name,

There are stars inside of his eyes.

Then they're gone.

"I'll be back." I promise.

"Don't bother."

Ignoring his contemptful meow, I walk back to Brownfur and Pyrewing.

"How'd it go?"I ask Brownfur.

My son purrs warmly, though his eyes are blurred over with sleepiness. "S'fine. Tidalwave... she and I... mates."

I manage to muster up some astonishment for his sake, trying to deal with the continued shaking that has crept its way up and is now making my whole body shiver involuntarily. "T-that's great news!"
"I'm just... glad. This family. The clan. Everything is finally pulling together." Brownfur says.

"This is the best day of my life." Pyrewing says. His voice is off. Forced. In an odd way... it's almost like he's threatening me.

I feel like I should be happy, but within me there's only a hollow void of emptiness. I try to conjure up even the most halfhearted of purrs to find that I can feel nothing at all.

"Yes," I say stiffly, "It's... amazing."

"Is something wrong?" mews Brownfur. "You sound like you're about to cry."

"I'm just so proud," I tell him, resting my head against his in an attempt to offset the awkwardness. I take in a deep breath of his scent and jolt back.

The smell of carrion hits my nose. I stare at my son in terror to see a deformed shape with many legs and arms, an abomination staring at me with dead, lifeless eyes.

"Mother?" he wheezes, his voice layered upon many others. "Are you alright?"

"Ashleap." Pyrewing says.

I blink and the voices are gone, leaving only a very confused Brownfur and a slightly angry Pyrewing.

What happened? Why do I feel so disgusting? What *was* that?

Something is wrong inside my head. It feels empty. I wait for the response or cry of some voice, as if something is about to happen, and unsurprisingly recieve nothing.

What's wrong with me?

I shake my head several times, trying to shake off the feeling and only making my head hurt more. "I'm feeling sick. I just need air." I tell them. "I'm very proud, I'll be with you later, I just..."

Pyrewing presses against me, his fur warm. "We can go together. I know somewhere you love more than anywhere else in the world."

He leads me out of camp as I almost press into him, as once Infernoleap pressed into me the day he broke his leg. The day he learned he would never be a warrior.

I never realized before how intimate it was.

I never had a name for the bitterness in his tone when he talked about Pyrewing.

Jealousy.

Pyrewing's voice snaps me out of my trance. "We're here."

I stare ahead at a hill I know all too well. The yellow flowers blow in the breeze, their scent reassuring. I let the sun soak into my fur and my body stops shaking. The wind is full of voices, some of which I can't recognize.

Do you know why this ledge is important?

"You've been quiet. Are you alright?" Pyrewing asks, nudging me gently. His purr is so kind, so genuine, that it makes me feel sick. I feel dirty just being there, lying to him...

I look down at my paws. The gray is sickeningly bright, warmed by the gentle sun and the hot, humid air that surrounds me like a blanket of leaves. They are the paws of another cat. A medicine cat. Someone who died long ago... am I dead, too?

The sky flickers around me.

"None of this is real." I almost whine the words, my heart thrashing against the sides of my chest as it beats frantically.

"What?" Pyrewing asks.

"None of this is real." I repeat angrily. "This whole world is fake and *I'm not Ashleap!*" I yowl it so loud it makes my throat hoarse. Every sensation is so real and as I stare at Pyrewing's shocked face, breathing heavily.

"Rushcall."

I stare into his eyes, which are filled with stars again, no pupils visible. His whole pelt is a sweeping field of stars, the trees around us flickering out of existence and all of them made of moonlight.

"Am I dead?" I ask.

"You don't have to go back. You'll never have to leave again. This world is made from your own memories, along with all of the other cats here and in the tunnels. It's yours. We made it for you."

"You... you knew." I hiss, recalling dozens of previous ventures. A million memories burn into my mind, days spent pining for this world that can now be mine forever and yet now that I have it, all I can feel is ugly resentment.

"I've seen you go." he admits, getting closer and closer. "I watch you disappear and every time you get a little bit further away from here."

I back up slightly, ears flattened. "I finally had a reason to live. Others who cared about me. I had a social life, friends, cats who no longer saw me as a murderer..."

"You can't leave me." he says desperately. Novablaze's eyes. Starry eyes. Empty ones. All three of them stare at me as the universe turns around me and my mind turns angrily with it, struggling to reconcile. "I can't lose you again."

I say quietly, "Me neither."

With that, I turn and run.

He races after, a mournful yowl splitting the air as I race through the new DragonClan forest. The world blurs, swapping between the vibrant greenleaf and what I can only guess is StarClan territory

again and again. As I run further, the color seems to pale from both until I'm running between ugly trees with no texture or color, and eventually there's nothing at all but gray.

My paws don't make any sound as I keep walking, terrified. There's no sound anywhere and Pyrewing is gone.

No.

In the distance, a single hole awaits me, a long, dark tunnel into nothingness. I step closer and the world comes to life again. Pyrewing stands in the distance, suspended in midrun.

Two voices return to my head.

Rushcall.

Rushcall.

Don't do it.

You can't.

Please.

I look back at Pyrewing, gazing upon his frightened expression. As I lower my paw, I feel a shiver run up my spine. I remember being cold, fear, and last of all Novablaze picking me up.

The trees are real here. The air is fragrant. It's a paradise that I made up in my own mind. A world where I never made any mistakes.

A world where someone better than me takes my place.

Someone... who isn't me.

I lower my paw and spring forwards into the abyss.

For a few seconds, the darkness around me keeps going, plunging me further and further into the depths, as I swerve onto my back in mid air, unable to set myself back upright. As I look up one last

time, I notice in the dull light that there are seeds clinging to my pelt.

With that, I close my eyes and let the darkness take me.

Crack.

After

The snow has stopped now. My paws crunch on through the desolate cold, though I can hardly feel a thing. Even my paws no longer tingle with sensation as I lift my paw above the snow only to press it back down into it again, a steady precession that leads nowhere.

The world is empty and silent. Wherever I've ended up, it's peaceful. Is this where I'm meant to spend eternity, damned to nothingness for crimes I didn't commit?

A familiar face is visible on the horizon. The snow crunches beneath my paws as I run to her, halting abruptly before Knottedstar. She purrs. "It's nice to see you here, Rushcall."

"Where is 'here'?" I ask.
"You know about StarClan. You've seen the tangled web of your own memories. You've experienced our own world on your own terms. This is none of those." She shakes her head. "Right now, we are in between worlds, on our way to cross over. Unfortunately, you and I are headed in different directions."

"Why are you here?" I ask, shivering slightly.

"These old bones weren't meant for the cold." she sighs. Her breath freezes in the air, a thin white trail from her throat. "I'll see you soon, Rushcall, but for now, you need to wake up."

Snow falls around me, a perfect storm of pure white, and I cry out for Knottedstar like an abandoned kit until my throat is raw and-

"Knottedstar!" I cry, opening my eyes as I sits bolt upright. As I do so, my head slams into Novablaze's.

"Rushcall!" he yells, stumbling back. "Oh, StarClan, that really hurt."
"Novablaze!" I say, trying to get up only to find my legs are like jelly. "You're okay!"

He lowers his head. "It's not Novablaze anymore."

My eyes widen. "She's really dead?"
He nods solemnly.

"What happened?!" I insist.

Goldenfire walks into the den, Sparrowsong at her side. His eyes light up when he sees me awake and he presses his head against my neck, purring loudly. "You're alright. Rushcall, what in StarClan's name happened to you?"

I shake my head. "You'd never believe it. I've just been... away a little while. That's all you need to know."

"That's not an answer!" Sparrowsong hisses. "You've been out for three days. Novablaze was worried you wouldn't wake up at all. We were really worried about you!"
I nod. Despite the severity of the situation, I hardly feel any tension at all. Instead, I feel like some weight has been lifted from my chest, something indescribably heavy which has taken flight and left me alone.

I probe the backs of my mind and find that there's no one there, no voice in my head and no foreign presence grabbing at my consciousness. The only thing left is a story that needs telling, and I'd be more than happy to tell it.

"Alright." I say, turning to my anxious friends. "I can tell you everything. It's a long story, but it starts a long time ago with a cat named Ashleap and her charming mate, Pyrewing..."

***

No one saw Knottedstar when she died, but her body was apparently dragged to camp by a cat the color of pitch, a cat who looked remarkably like a fox.

Rumor has it that she had gone into the tunnels to make amends with an old friend.

Others say that she was desperately trying to atone for her

mistakes.

Fewer still insist she was praying for the life of her wayward apprentice.

***

When the snow melts, Novastar and I go into the tunnels. No one has gone down there since Knottedstar, so naturally we're apprehensive, but there's some things I need to see just to reassure myself that it's over.

The darkness is just as terrifying as it was beforehand, but his presence is much more of a comfort than Lunarshine's knowledge or Ashleap's intuition. Having a flesh-and-blood companion helps in ways I never could have imagined before... and yet I'm still panicking. Every pawstep we take corresponds to a heartbeat. He speeds up and my heart begins racing like a hare running away from a hunting patrol. He slows down as we finish our ascent and it freezes.

"Hello? Night terrors sent from beyond the Dark Forest? I've come to kill you in order to appease my mate!" Novastar calls into the darkness.

"We aren't mates!" I hiss back playfully.

"Are you sure?" he says. "You'd think by the amount of time we spend together that we were a couple. I'm sure Sparrowsong would love to have an uncle for his kits."

"You're already their uncle on one side." I point out. "Goldenfire would be terribly angry if she knew you forgot you were siblings. She knew that leader would go to your head."

"Yes, yes, I know. One side is good enough... but why not make it both?"

"You're insufferable." I say, but his teasing eyes have already gotten the best of me. My fear has disappeared like dew on a day in greenleaf. "Can we go?"

He nods and we stalk the corridors together. Despite how often we flinch, nothing in the darkness seems to stir. In fact, all of the tunnels are remarkably empty. I sniff the air to only smell Novastar's fur, take a glance into the darkness to find that no one else has ventured here and not a pawstep remains planted in the ground.

"It's never been so quiet." I whisper breathlessly.

"It's kind of creepy. Sometimes I wonder how tunnelkeepers stand it." Novastar interjects.
"Well, since you haven't appointed a new one yet..." I say.
"I don't think we need one." Novastar meows firmly.

"Why not?" The mere suggestion is brash and reckless. After what happened the last time when we went without one, he wants to do it again? He's told me on multiple occasions he was just waiting for a sign, but this?

He snaps me out of my thoughts quickly, barely noticing the disturbed expression on my face. "Can't you see? The spirits are resting. Whatever happened here, whatever spirits once roamed these tunnels, they've finally been put to rest." He looks deep into my eyes, his own brown disks vibrant even in the tunnels. They remind me so much of the ones I gave up moons ago, though I no longer long for that cat. Ever since Ashleap and Lunarshine left me, my dreams have been silent and my life has been consistently normal.

Noting my silence, he adds, "Do you think it was your dream?"
"The tunnels became haunted after Ashleap fell down here." I say.
"It's plausible. For all we know... it could have been Knottedstar." I want so badly to believe she died for something.

"It's finally over, regardless." Novastar says.

"So this is the end." I say.

"No," he replies. "It's the beginning. Our beginning."

I press my fur into his. "I like that."

"Me too."

He takes a step and murmurs, "We're here."

Sunlight shines in through a faraway opening, dying the world and our own pelts gold as light stretches to meet darkness. Down below our paws, golden flowers grow in and around two interwoven skeletons. The moon stretches over the sun and Lunarshine is finally with Ashleap for all eternity, the two of them united in death.

The world is still and my head is silent.

Then quietly, perfectly, he turns around and the world starts again.

So do we.

Author's Note

This is the story I wanted to tell. The land has grown silent now, but still in other worlds it cries out to me. It calls for its children across the forest, across time, and perhaps across worlds.

There will be more, in time. There will be other cats who have received second chances and others still who are standing on their own for the first time.

As for me?

Whether it be sun or moon or light and fire, I will run across the starry fields with those who loved me, free of visions and finally free to rest.

May your paws ever be swift and your claws sharp.

***

Well, this has been an amazing journey. I'd like to thank a few people for the support my story has received so far, but first, some

backstory for those of you unaware of this story's origin-

Ashleap's Fall is based around DragonClan, a Warriors RP that I have upheld for over 2 years (established October 22, 2013!) on Clash of Clans. Over the years, what began as a silly project between friends became something much more powerful and dear to my heart. Since I started Clash and Wattpad only months apart, the two have always been linked in my mind and my earliest followers came from people on there. I will never forget their (ongoing) support and the amount of love they've given my stories over the years. We might be a clan, but we're also a family.

I'd also like to regretfully say that this will be my last Warriors fanfiction, at least for the time being. Though I do enjoy writing them, I'd like to take a quick breather and possibly get into some more original works. The Spoofs will update more and hopefully my prose will improve as well. For those of you who enjoyed this story, I'd like to interrupt this cheerful talk to remind you that I do have other stories and your continued support on all of them is ALWAYS appreciated. The first Dreamland book is Gardenkeeper's Daughters, for those of you interested in my original fiction.

((If anyone's curious, Vengeance and Thin Ice, the previous DCfic novels, are also hidden somewhere. They're old and are definitely not canon with this book and only possibly with each other, but they're still fun for a light read.))

And now, for some miraculous people without whom this book could not be the same-

Some people who were part of this RP (I won't put their RP names up, but you're free to ask them yourself. They're all magnificent people and I KNOW I'm going to forget to tag some so please call me out on it if you don't see your name.)

SplashyKittyCat (She just missed it, actually. Sorry for taking Rush's kits out of the book. For those of you curious, their names are Plasmakit, Clearkit, Shinekit, and Shroudedkit.)

Mapleclaw (PS Broken Souls is starting soon get hype)

Special thanks to:

My salty ex-catfriend Deltarush for the extremely helpful motivational memes and the WindClan allegiances, a clan that never came up but sure as heck existed at the time.

Blazestorm and Sparrowheart838 for being some of my most devoted commenters, as well as leaving long comments with tons of feedback. In addition to being amazing supporters, they're also incredible writers and you (yes you!) should check out their stuff because both of them are some of the best Warrior Cat fanfiction writers I've ever had the pleasure to read.

With that concludes my final DragonClan book. Thank you all so much.